

OPTIMISM *for life*

While some of us are naturally cheerful souls, most of us find it difficult to stay upbeat and positive in the face of life's challenges. The good news is that optimism can be learned, writes Catherine Howie-Patten.

Happiness is not a destination. It's a method of life.

– Burton Hills –



According to the Belgian League of Optimists, an organisation founded in 2005 by

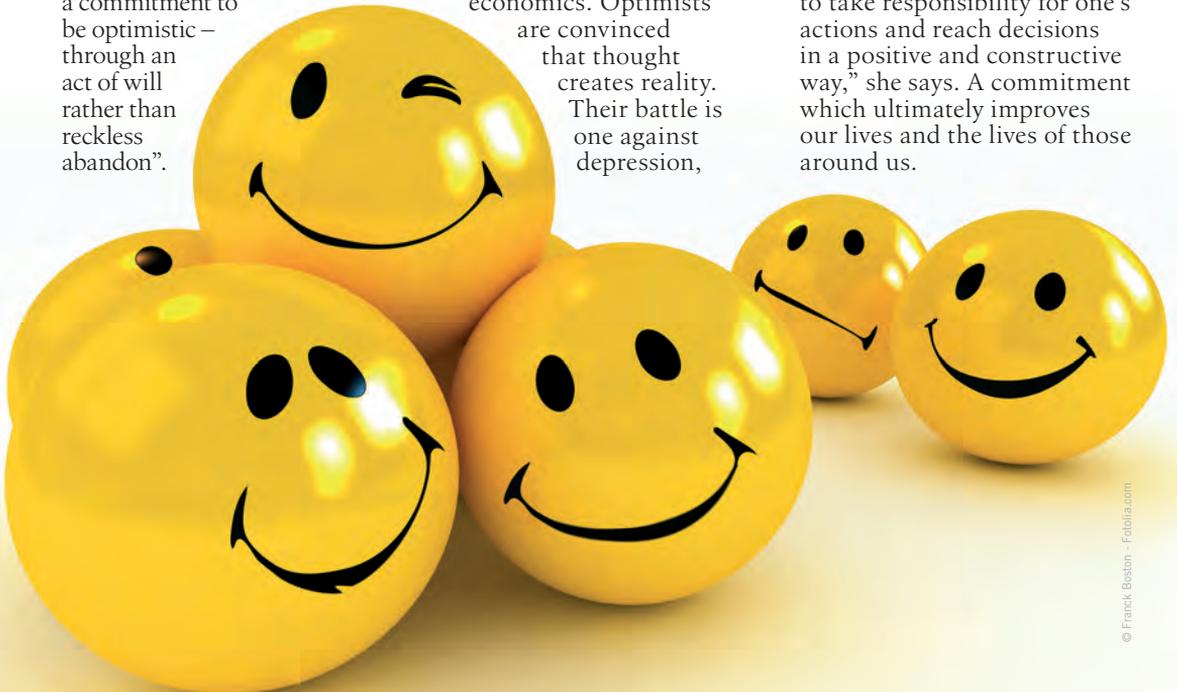
Belgian lawyer and barrister Luc Simonet, “optimism is a learning process which starts with a conscious decision.” The aim of the League is to “initiate a cultural revolution based on a commitment to be optimistic – through an act of will rather than reckless abandon”.

Luc is quick to say that the League has a humorous side to it – and that the creation of the fictional country of Optimistan falls firmly within Belgian surrealist tradition. It also, however, has a serious purpose and a number of very influential members. He quotes the philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who said that as the world becomes more complex, its level of consciousness must also rise. The aim is to promote a growing level of consciousness based on positive values, responsible citizenship and the primacy of human relations over economics. Optimists are convinced that thought creates reality. Their battle is one against depression,

negativity and a sense of pointlessness. “The world is a much better place than the media would have us believe – and, what is more, realistic optimism is good for your health!” says Luc.

FROM NEUROSCIENCES TO SERENITY

Catherine Schwennicke, Belgian psychologist and a member of the association, Prefrontality, offers a scientific perspective to the question. “What we are talking about here is not naïve, blind optimism where we see everything through rose-tinted glasses, it’s a conscious choice to take responsibility for one’s actions and reach decisions in a positive and constructive way,” she says. A commitment which ultimately improves our lives and the lives of those around us.



Prefrontality is a group of professionals who provide support and coaching for individuals and families in various contexts, including hospitals, schools and companies. They follow a scientific approach based on the latest advances in neurocognitive and behavioural therapy. Catherine makes the link between this approach and optimism which, it seems, is all in the brain.

The four main regions of the brain that govern our emotions are the reptilian (life and survival instincts, stress and calm), the paleolimbic (power struggle) and neolimbic (reward and avoidance, emotions, personality and motivation) and the prefrontal cortex (adaptation, reflection, innovation, creativity, sentiments and management of emotions).

Optimism is located in the prefrontal region of the brain just behind the forehead. This area is strongly stimulated by meditation among other techniques. According to the Prefrontality, when the prefrontal area is active, we are serene, calm and able to make sound, positively reasoned decisions.

LA VIE EN ROSE

So how do we train our brains to be more positive? It seems that our ‘default setting’ tends to be in the neolimbic region of the brain – what Catherine calls the automatic mode. This favours a reliance on routine, a tendency to refuse to accept things as they are and to oversimplify – it’s good or it’s bad, black or white. When

the neolimbic is dominant, we tend to be very certain of our opinions and rely on emotion rather than intellect in the decision-making process. We also tend to be more concerned with what other people think and let this excessively influence our behaviour.

If there is a solution to your problem, then why worry. If there is no solution to your problem, then why worry.”

– Shantiveda –

If the prefrontal region is dominant however – the adaptive mode – this favours a high level of curiosity about life and life experiences, an acceptance of life as it is, the ability to see different shades of grey rather than just black and white and to ‘relativise’ situations. There is a greater degree of reflection and self-knowledge and also, perhaps as a result of this, a greater trust in our own personal opinions.

Automatic	Adaptive
Routine	Curiosity
Refusal/Denial	Acceptance
Simplification	Nuance
Certitude	Relativity
Empiricism	Reflection
Social image	Personal opinion

When everything is going well, we have a strong tendency to let ourselves be led by routine and generally held, preconceived ideas. The neolimbic brain takes the lead. When external conditions change, this can

cause stress, anger, denial, anxiety and depression. If we want to adopt a more positive outlook then we need to call on a different part of our brain – the prefrontal cortex – the seat of curiosity, intellectual flexibility, innovation, creativity and optimism.

REASONS TO BE CHEERFUL

The League of Optimists of the Kingdom of Belgium boast around 4,000 members, and there are similar associations in The Netherlands, Germany, France, Spain and, most recently, Switzerland. An international branch of the association, Optimistes sans Frontières, was founded in 2008.

What do they hope to achieve? No less than a cultural revolution – a mutation based on confidence in the future and replacing human relations and the environment at the centre of our preoccupations – the kind of confidence that inspires positive action and a spirit of co-operation. Luc Simonet quotes the Belgian intellectual, Jean Rey, who said: “The spirit blows over the world like the wind over the sea. If we want it to be effective, we must open the sail up wide and point our boat in the right direction.”

MORE INFORMATION:

La Ligue des Optimistes

www.liguedesoptimistes.be

Prefrontality

www.prefrontality.be

Institute of NeuroCognitivism

www.neurocognitivism.be