

Are You a Positive Person?

by Stefan Bechtel

"Most of us are fully aware that we can make ourselves ill with excessive worry, or fear, or sorrow," says Jeanne Achterberg, a researcher at the University of Texas Health Science Center in Dallas, Texas. "But the notion that the reverse might be true - that we stay healthy or become healthy by positive attitudes and behaviors - is often met with skepticism. We tend to think we can make ourselves sick but to get well we have to go to the doctor." Working with her husband, G. Frank Lawlis, Achterberg has shown that your state of mind has a profound effect on the state of your health - for worse or for better. If your attitudes can make you disease-prone, they can also make you health-prone.

In fact, she told PREVENTION magazine, she and her husband have come to believe that the mental and the physical are so closely interwoven that the term *body-mind* more accurately conveys the truth. "We use that term to get away from the old notion of psychosomatic medicine [mind-caused disease], because it's impossible to separate the mind from the body. They're a whole. Every thought affects the body in some way, and every physical movement or change is accompanied by some mental alteration," she says.

In a series of studies, for instance, Achterberg and her co-workers examined the personalities of approximately 200 terminal cancer patients. There was a striking difference, they found, between those who significantly outlived their predicted life expectancies and those who did not. The survivors shared a whole host of positive psychological traits - things like an utter refusal to give up hope, a rejection of their role as invalids, self-reliance, an openness to new ideas and a powerful belief in themselves. "These people were deniers, at least when it came to the bad news," Achterberg told us. "They refused to accept the diagnosis, refused to accept their sickness. I don't think they understood their 'limits.' They were what we call 'the superstars.'" One likely explanation (at least for bearing good news) are endorphins, the natural substances the body produces to soothe pain and stimulate the immune system.

But whatever the details turn out to be, the broad outlines are becoming increasingly clear. As Norman Cousins has described it, "Nothing is more wondrous about the 15 billion neurons [Actually, the current estimate is 86 billion neurons!] in the human brain than their ability to convert thoughts, hopes, ideas and attitudes into chemical substances. Every emotion, negative or positive, makes its registrations on the body's systems." Cousins, a former editor of *Saturday Review*, fought off a degenerative spinal disease with massive doses of laughter.

A growing body of research points to the profound truth that underlies his experience. A survey of the health habits and beliefs of 1,000 Californians found that those who felt best about themselves described themselves as being in better mental and physical health than those who suffered from low self-esteem. A study at Southern California Medical Center in Los Angeles has suggested that anxiety, depression and the repression of anger may help cause high blood pressure.

And Lawrence LeShan, a New York psychologist who has worked with cancer patients for years, has identified several emotional factors that might affect susceptibility to cancer. "An inability to express creativity and emotional needs can put a great deal of stress on the body's cancer defense mechanism," LeShan says. And this has been borne out by 30 years of experimental and clinical work. Also, disruptions of major relationships - such as the loss of a job or a loved one and the inability to find new ways to meet emotional needs may be contributing factors as well.

The strange thing about all this, though, is that the mind is like an iceberg: mostly underwater, in the cool dimness of semiconsciousness or the utter darkness of unconsciousness. You may fully believe in the mind's power to heal, yet still be stuck in a rut of petty jealousy or selfishness. On the other hand, you may have a deeper streak of courage and optimism than you realize.

Discovering more about how well you're using your mind to help your health is the point of the following informal self-test we've created. Are you really a positive thinker, or do you just think you are? Have you slipped into cynical self-defeating attitudes without really meaning to? Where could you stand to improve?

Respond to each of the following. Circle 5 for *Always or Almost Always*; 4 for *Usually*; 3 for *Sometimes*; 2 for *Rarely*; 1 for *Never*.

1. When the unexpected forces you to change your plans, are you quick to spot a hidden advantage in this new situation?

1 2 3 4 5

2. When you catch a stranger staring at you, do you conclude it's because he or she finds you attractive?

1 2 3 4 5

3. Do you like most of the people you meet?

1 2 3 4 5

4. When you think about the next year, do you tend to think you'll be better off than you are now?

1 2 3 4 5

5. Do you often stop to admire things of beauty?

1 2 3 4 5

6. When someone finds fault with you or something you've done, can you tell the difference between useful criticism and "sour grapes," which is better off ignored?

1 2 3 4 5

7. Do you praise your spouse or best friend more often than you criticize him or her?

1 2 3 4 5

8. Do you believe the human race, will survive into the twenty-second century?

1 2 3 4 5

9. Are you surprised when a friend lets you down?

1 2 3 4 5

10. Do you think of yourself as happy?

1 2 3 4 5

11. If a police officer stopped you for speeding and you were quite certain you weren't, would you firmly argue your case and even take it to court to prove you were right?

1 2 3 4 5

12. Do you feel comfortable making jokes about yourself?

1 2 3 4 5

13. Do you believe that, overall, your state of mind has had a positive effect on your physical health?

1 2 3 4 5

14. If you made a list of your 10 favorite people, would you be on it?

1 2 3 4 5

15. When you think back over the past few little successes before your setbacks and failures?

1 2 3 4 5

Scoring:

- **> 65** Outstanding. Your optimism is a powerful force.
- **60-64** Excellent. You are generally a positive person.
- **55-59** Good. You are typically a positive thinker, but not always.
- **50-54** Fair. Your positive and negative sides are evenly matched.
- **Below 50** Do you notice consistent negative patterns? Where could you improve?