

## *7 Strategies To Optimise Optimism In Teens – And Why it Matters*

*by Dr. Justin Coulson*

“If you can get through year 8 and year 9, you can get through anything.”

That’s a saying I share with students, teachers, and parents alike. These are tough years for many students, and if school is not a positive experience for them, they can feel hopeless. Hopelessness – believing things are bad and are going to stay bad – leads to helplessness. Helplessness leads to depression.

But what if we could give children hope. What if we could help them understand that things can – and will – get better? Would it matter if they were more optimistic?

### **Always a loser**

In the 1980’s researchers began to notice that teenagers often hold strong and permanent beliefs about personality and ability.

“Once a loser, always a loser.”

“I suck at maths. I’m just stupid when it comes to numbers – especially polynomials and calculus. Plus I’ll never use it.”

“I’m ugly. My face is full of pimples and I’ll be stuck like this forever.”

This permanent belief about something intrinsic and all encompassing can paralyse our teens, giving them no faith in the future, and closing them off to the possibility of good things happening.

In other words, these beliefs shut down optimism, and harm their hope.

### **Reduce the risk of depression with optimism**

New research published in *Clinical Psychological Science* indicates that if we can help kids sense that things can change for the better, we can mitigate depression risk. That is, optimistic teens – the ones who believe that good things can happen and personality, ability, or even looks aren’t necessarily permanent – have higher wellbeing than less-optimistic teens.

David Yeager’s recent study took 600 Year 9 students who participated in a brief intervention that emphasised how people can change. Students read articles about the brain’s capacity for growth and learning (brain plasticity and ‘growth mindset’ concepts). The students also read advice from older students reassuring them that high school gets better.

Students were then asked to write about their own experiences of people’s personalities changing.

Nine months later, the experimenters checked in on the students. Among the control group (who did not read the articles or write about changes in people), rates of depressive symptoms increased from 18% to 25%. Things were worse, rather than better. But those who were involved in the intervention fared better. While they didn’t

necessarily improve, they certainly didn't decline as the control group had. (Even student who were victims of bullying remained resilient.)

What does it all mean?

Giving teenagers hope at one of the toughest times of their lives appears to reduce the danger that they'll become depressed.

But how?

Here are 7 strategies to optimise optimism in our teens:

#### 1. Empathise

Often our teens just need someone to be there and understand. Letting them know you can see they feel hopeless and they wonder why they should bother can be powerful for them. It validates their experience. Saying, "I felt like that when I was 15 too" can help them. But then we need to move them to a belief in a positive future doing the following:

#### 2. Emphasise "yet".

When a teen says, "I can't", smile and gently add "yet" to the end of their sentence. When they say, "I hate calculus. It's stupid. I'll never use it", acknowledge their feelings, and say, "It's a struggle right now isn't it. You can't do it yet." Those three little letters imply both an expectation that it will be done, and a belief that it can be done.

#### 3. Steer their focus to what they can control

Teens often worry about things that they have no control over. Ask them, "What can you do right now about this?" If they can't do anything, acknowledge the predicament and empathise. If they can, steer them towards an answer. "You feel lousy. What options do you have?" "You're struggling with the assignment. Where is the best place you can think of to start?"

#### 4. Focus on the end

A high school teacher used to do a regular "talk" with her students. She would write on the board, "There is life after high school – and it's GREAT!" She would chat briefly about their struggles, and then promise that it gets better. The students looked forward to the future. The talk had impact.

#### 5. Emphasise strengths

Tell them what you see in them. "You have some remarkable strengths that you don't get to use enough at school..." and be specific about what they are! (You might find out what they want to do and tell them, "You'll be great at that – with hard work you'll excel.")

#### 6. Understand mindsets

Become acquainted with research around the way our brains change. There are popular books such as Carol Dweck's *Mindset* and Norman Doidge's *The Brain the*

Changes Itself. These books will change the way you talk about ability, possibility, and the future – and inspire your teens to be more optimistic.

#### 7. Avoid the superficial

If a teen feels lousy, being told to “cheer up, it will get better” is unlikely to help. No one believes you when they don’t feel you understand. It feels dismissive and patronising.

Optimism – believing that good things are coming soon – may be one of our most positive tools for boosting our teen’s self-belief, and reducing the dangers of depression. Good things are coming. The future is bright. Help our teens believe it.

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