

SECOND
EDITION

Optimism BOOSTERS

BY SELINA BYRNE M.A.P.S.

Innovative
Resources

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The idea behind *Optimism Boosters*

'The right question can change our brain chemistry by increasing possibility, control and motivation.'

Sometimes when we have a problem or dilemma, our thinking isn't as clear as it needs to be. We can feel stuck in emotions that keep us looping over and over in negative-thought-land! This is especially true when we feel pessimistic or depressed. Often when we listen to other people talk about their problems, we feel we know exactly what questions to ask them in order to help them see their situation differently or to see what action they could take to improve things. But when a situation triggers stress or confusion

in ourselves, it can be difficult to know what to do and how to think our way out of it. It's also important to be aware of our own emotions as they arise; to acknowledge these, perhaps even using them to guide us towards issues that need some new thinking methods or problem-solving strategies.

This pack of cards is designed to help with the thinking part of the process. It will enable you to clarify and re-direct what might be affecting your emotions and keeping you stuck in depression-land!

Optimism Boosters is a tool to help 'solution-focused thinking'. This kind of thinking is an effective antidote to pessimism, negativity, depression or stuck states of being because it enables you to think about how you want

things to be and how you can improve your situation by taking action. *Optimism Boosters* gives you access to thirty questions that are designed both to help you view your situation in a different way and think of actions you can take to improve your situation.

These questions combine well with a mindfulness approach to emotions. Non-judgmental awareness of the emotions involved in the situation is important both before and after asking the solution-focused questions.

These are the kinds of questions that psychologists or counsellors might ask you, and they might be the kinds of questions your friends might ask. With a bit of practice, they can also be questions you can ask yourself automatically when you are in some kind of difficulty.

Of course, there are many useful questions to ask yourself (and others). The thirty questions provided in this card set are just some of the useful questions you can add to your repertoire.

'These cards create powerful windows into change by asking questions about goals, possibilities and strategies for optimistic action.'

Where did the idea come from?

The author of *Optimism Boosters*, Selina Byrne, is a consulting psychologist (Member of the Australian Psychological Society) and clinical nutritionist who conducts professional development programs addressing wellbeing, optimism and resilience in many organisations. These programs include the psychology of optimism, the brain chemistry of mood and wellbeing, mood nutrition, personality and wellbeing, and many other aspects of mood and wellbeing.

Participants in Selina's seminars have found the psychology of optimism particularly fascinating, especially its links to emotions, brain chemistry and mood boosting. Selina created the *Optimism Boosters* card pack as a tool to assist people to develop psychological skills in optimism. The cards do this by introducing a

range of useful questions that, with practice, will arise automatically to help create habitually optimistic responses to life's challenges. Selina has also used these questions with individual clients over many years, and developed the prototype for the card set during the mid-1990s when working with psychiatric clients in a rehabilitation setting.

The thirty cards in the *Optimism Boosters* set are divided into three suits or 'skill sets'—goals, possibilities and strategies. These skill sets and the questions that appear on the cards are based on solid psychological research and have been tested in training situations as well as in clinical practice. The skills sets build on research and writings by Martin Seligman, CR Snyder, Charles Carver and Michael Scheier, and Bill O'Hanlon (see References section).

What is optimism?

Optimism is NOT positive thinking; so what is it?

Optimism involves generating:

1. HOPE that things can change
2. ACTION to make sure they do change.

Most people assume that optimism is the same as positive thinking. Positive thinking is when you reassure yourself that a positive outcome will occur, or you try to visualise the positive outcome in the hope that this will increase the chances of it occurring. The optimism approach is a bit different in that it focusses on how you can face your situation and choose the best strategy for adapting to that situation. Optimism requires you to focus

on your desired state (how you want things to be) while you check the story you are telling yourself about the situation.

For example, many people feel unhappy with their health or fitness. A positive thinking approach might involve affirming to yourself that you are becoming healthier every day. While this might be momentarily uplifting, it may not trigger follow-through action. Using the optimism approach, we would firstly clarify where the person wanted to be in terms of their health or fitness. We might then help them to identify a specific, 'small chunk' goal in relation to their health. We might listen to the story they are telling themselves ('I don't have time to do exercise' or 'It's too late to start at my age' or 'I hate doing exercise') and ask a question that

allows them to consider other possibilities ('Where is the evidence for that?' or 'What would an on-looker say about this?') We would then ask another question that might help to generate strategies the person could use to improve their fitness and health. For example, 'What have you done in the past that might help?' or 'What do others in your situation do?'

As stated previously, we would also be aware of any emotions relating to the situation at hand (for example, frustration, fear, irritation and so on) and acknowledge or name these without getting into analysis. Emotions are great guides that point us towards where we need to focus, but if we get too bogged down in the story of the emotion, it can be very difficult to shift into a state of possibility and action.

Using the *Optimism Boosters* card pack can help you ask yourself (or others) questions to clarify your goal, see possibilities for improving your situation and generate actions that you can immediately take to improve how you feel about things.

How can optimism skills help people?

The research into the psychology of optimism is based on studies into a condition called 'learned helplessness'. Psychologists and other researchers have discovered that people or animals show changes in behaviour when they decide they can do nothing to improve or change a situation they find themselves in. These changes include

lowered mood, alterations in brain chemistry, increased or decreased appetite, lowered sex drive and decreased motivation. These changes are typical of what we now call 'depression' in people.

While the majority of people and animals respond to adversity with a 'learned helplessness' or 'giving up' response, a smaller percentage were able to persist despite setbacks. Further research into how these people were able to display resilience and persistence revealed that their thinking processes were different from those who had given up or felt helpless. The optimistic responders talked to themselves differently, asked themselves different questions and continued to take action until something improved. When these optimistic responders were studied over time, results suggested

that optimism helps us achieve better results at school and university, maintain better health, succeed in sport and do well in the workplace.

While our tendency towards optimism and pessimism is partly genetic, many studies have demonstrated that we can increase our level of optimism by learning the skills that natural optimists use, and that this can actually help overcome and even prevent depressive episodes. These skills form the basis of the questions used in the *Optimism Boosters* card pack.

'Noticing and naming emotions helps them dissipate and lessens their power over our thinking processes.'

Emotions and optimism

Sometimes optimism skills can seem very cognitive or thinking-based, without taking into account the different emotional or physical states people can experience. It's important to acknowledge emotions relating to a particular problem.

Often when we are faced with a difficulty, we feel frustrated, stuck, annoyed, angry, sometimes even sad or despairing. Using a mindfulness approach, we can scan for, notice and label these emotions whilst also addressing the issue we are working on. Research and clinical practice has demonstrated that noticing and naming emotions helps them dissipate and lessens their power over our thinking processes.

HOW TO ACKNOWLEDGE FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS WHEN USING THE CARDS

- Write down all relevant emotions associated with your problem or situation.
- Rate each emotion on a scale of 1 - 10, with 10 being the most powerful.
- Once emotions have been named, recorded and rated, select one or more *Optimism Boosters* cards according to the activity you are doing. (For example, you may be picking cards for questions you have never asked yourself before or you may be picking cards at random. Many more suggestions for activities can be found in the 'Ideas for using *Optimism Boosters*' section later in this booklet.) After responding to the questions on the selected cards, emotions can again be

identified and rated from 1 - 10. While some new emotions may arise as a result of answering the question, generally we find that unpleasant emotions will decrease once the *Optimism Boosters* questions have been explored. This is one very powerful reason why this tool can be effective in working with people experiencing depression or anxiety.

How do we develop and maintain optimism skills?

There are many successful methods available to improve our levels of optimism. We can change brain chemistry by using food, music, exercise, meditation, social activity and creative pursuits; all of which can have a positive effect on optimism. One of the most effective methods involves learning

how to change the way we talk to ourselves. This can have a profound effect on our level of optimism, given that we talk to ourselves almost constantly.

Studies show that learning new thinking skills can have a powerful and permanent effect on mood by creating new neural pathways (automatic patterns) in the brain. These neural pathways become more established every time a person chooses to use their optimism skills. The aim is not to eliminate pessimistic thought patterns, but rather to become immediately aware of the link between unpleasant emotions and pessimistic responses—and to know how to overcome the initial response by using a question that assists in generating an optimistic response. Over time, the optimistic responses become more automatic and we are less likely to dwell on any pessimistic thoughts.

The three key skill sets: goals, possibilities, strategies

Through extensive research into the different skills used in creating and maintaining optimism, three patterns emerged. The first pattern is the ability to ‘think into the future’ and clarify an effective goal. This is an extremely important skill that is under-utilised by many people facing difficulty.

THINKING OUR WAY INTO THE FUTURE

The act of focussing on the goal generates changes in brain chemistry that increase motivation, drive and clarity. Focussing on how we want things to be (instead of how they are now) encourages our brain to accept the idea that things can and will improve. It also helps ensure that when we choose an action strategy, we choose one that moves towards the goal we have chosen. For



example, many people initiate action without first clarifying their goal, and this can lead to disappointment. Many of us initiate action when we are upset or angry, and our action can make a bad situation worse. By stopping to clarify our goal, we can focus on what effect we would like to create, and hopefully choose an action that supports that goal.

There are ten 'Goals' cards in the *Optimism Boosters* set. These cards provide questions that can help people consider what they actually want to achieve and develop a clear and realistic goal for their chosen situation.

CHALLENGING OUR STORIES

The second pattern in creating and maintaining optimism is the ability to listen to the stories we tell ourselves about good and bad events in our lives. Some stories ('I failed the exam because I needed to do more preparation') suggest possibilities for change. Other stories ('I failed the exam because I'm not smart enough') suggest that lack of success is permanent and unchangeable.

Studies demonstrate that the stories we tell ourselves about why things happen are quite powerful because we then act as if those stories are the truth. Learning to challenge

unhelpful stories ('I can't because I'm too busy', 'I'm just no good at this', 'Everybody thinks I'm a loser', 'That just happened because I was in the right place at the right time') by questioning the evidence to support those stories is very effective and provides a 'reality test' for some of the unhelpful things we say to ourselves.

GENERATING FRESH POSSIBILITIES

There are ten 'Possibilities' cards in the



Optimism Boosters set. They are designed to help to generate possibilities in the way we are viewing our situation. The aim is to see the situation as changeable, as well as gaining some perspective. This promotes changes to brain chemistry by providing a sense of control and wellbeing.

STRATEGIES, ACTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The third pattern emerging from many optimism and hope studies is the ability to use problem-solving skills to generate strategies that will improve or change a situation. Many people know what they want but are unable to think of what to do to change things. The third set of questions (Strategies) is designed to assist people to think of things that they can do that will change or improve their scenario. For example, asking questions such as ‘What

have you done in the past that might help?’ or ‘What are others doing in the same situation?’ can lead us to think of resources, actions and next steps we might be overlooking.

The ten ‘Strategies’ questions in the *Optimism Boosters* set remind us that we have many resources for initiating change as long as we ask ourselves helpful questions. The right question can change our brain chemistry by increasing possibility, control and motivation.



Optimism
BOOSTERS

Who will notice first when things improve?

GOALS

Optimism
BOOSTERS

What is the first step towards achieving what I want?

STRATEGIES

Optimism
BOOSTERS

What is the first step towards achieving what I want?

STRATEGIES

What are the positive and humorous aspects of this situation?

POSSIBILITIES

Optimism
BOOSTERS

How can I go for a smaller goal?

GOALS

Optimism
BOOSTERS

How much will this matter in five years' time?

POSSIBILITIES

Optimism
BOOSTERS

What is the first step towards achieving what I want?

STRATEGIES

What should I consider before beginning?

Almost invariably, becoming curious about possible solutions or different ways of thinking about situations will energise and positively transform conversations with individuals, groups or teams. A palpable shift in the atmosphere can be felt as people begin to talk about fresh approaches to situations. However, it is important to keep in mind that sometimes when talking about personal and challenging matters, people can feel unexpectedly exposed or vulnerable. Powerful memories or feelings can suddenly arise.

While no training is needed to use *Optimism Boosters*, care and respect are always important. If you are facilitating conversations with individuals or groups using these cards, please consider what you will put in place to

help create a safe, respectful environment where people can be supported if strong emotions arise. It is important that nobody feels 'pressured' to participate or to speak about aspects of themselves if they do not wish to—especially if they are in a group setting. Equally, opportunity must be given for everyone in the group to have their turn and be heard respectfully, if they wish to participate.

Therefore, before you begin using this resource with others, please consider such things as:

- the timing
- the setting
- literacy and developmental levels

- cultural relevance and safety
- privacy
- ways people can 'pass'
- how people can be supported if strong emotions arise
- guidelines for listening and including everyone
- whether any follow up, feedback or evaluation is planned.

A WORD OF CAUTION

These cards are tools, not therapy. Sometimes our analysis of a difficult situation can trigger further confusion or distress. You may find that you need to access a qualified counsellor or psychologist to assist you, should this occur. These cards are a useful tool to use to help you see your situation differently, but there are times when a tool is simply inappropriate and it is important to work with a skilled professional. If at any given time using these cards is unhelpful, discontinue use and find a more appropriate time later.

Two broad methods for selecting cards

While there are countless creative ways of using cards with young people and adults (see the next section for some ideas), they all fall into two broad methods—deliberate choice or random selection.

DELIBERATE CHOICE

This method involves spreading the cards out on a table or other surface and inviting participants to look them over and make a selection based on a question or prompt such as:

- Pick a card for a question that intrigues you.
- Pick a card for a question you have asked yourself more than once before.

- Pick a card for a question you have never thought of before.
- Pick a question that you would like to focus on for the whole coming week.

If a person is unable to read, the facilitator can read through the cards with them.

Spreading the cards out on the floor can also be lots of fun. People get a bird's eye view of the cards, and they can walk around them or follow a path of cards. The cards can also be displayed on a wall, window or noticeboard. What about tucking one into the side of a mirror or placing it on your desk or computer?

RANDOM SELECTION

Random selection includes activities such as shuffling and dealing, placing the cards face down on a surface and asking people to choose 'blind', playing games that involve hiding and finding cards, lucky dips, selecting a card from a fan of random cards, and so on.

It is amazing how meaningful people find random selections; time and again people see significance and synchronicity in 'their' randomly-picked card. An element of whimsy and playfulness enters the room when cards are randomly picked. These activities can help set a tone of adventure and curiosity right from the start. People tend to relax and open up when they are having fun, so let your imagination come into play and have some random selection games up your sleeve!

'Time and again people see significance and synchronicity in 'their' randomly-picked card.'

Ideas for using *Optimism Boosters*

The *Optimism Boosters* card pack can immediately provide new perspectives about a situation. Use one, all or some of the cards to stimulate thinking, trigger conversations, navigate through unhelpful feelings, provide prompts for writing, or provide a focus for the day.

Card sets can be used in a wide variety of creative ways. People often find that once they get started with a few simple ideas, very soon lots of new activities occur to them. Here are some ideas to spark your imagination.

FOR A RAPID OPTIMISM BOOST

Pick a card using intuition: Shuffle the pack and think of your situation. Close your eyes

and let your intuition help you to select a card.

Example

Situation: having problems in your relationship or problems finding a relationship.

Card selected (from the 'Goals' suit): 'Which parts of this are up to me?'

Reflect, discuss or write down your intuitive responses to the card.

Daily reflection: Place the card pack on your desk or table and select one card to display each day. Get into the habit of looking at the card when you are having difficulty focussing or when you need inspiration. Cards can be swapped at any time for an extra boost.

Conversation starter: Stuck for conversation? Select one card, or ask your client or family member to choose a card. This can be related to a specific situation, or the person choosing the card can decide what the card best relates to. This can be particularly helpful for counsellors, social workers, supervisors, parents and families.

What next? Use responses to help determine actions. Need more inspiration? Select another card or choose from the spreads described below.

FOR IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

Three-card spread: Divide the pack into three sections based on the colour-coded suits: 'Goals', 'Possibilities', 'Strategies'. Shuffle each section/suit. Think about your situation and/or goal.

Draw one card from each suit and lay them out in the following order:

1. Goals
2. Possibilities
3. Strategies

Example

Situation: having problems in your relationship or problems finding a relationship.

First card selected ('Goals'): 'How can I go for a smaller goal?' Contemplate and/or write down and/or discuss your response before moving to the next card.

Second card selected ('Possibilities'): 'What can I learn from this?' As with previous card.

Third card selected ('Strategies'): 'What am I doing that has stopped things from getting worse?' As with previous card.

After reflecting on cards separately, draw your responses together and develop a helpful narrative around your situation. Develop a set of useful thoughts, actions and next steps related to the situation.

Six or Nine-card spread: Proceed as with the three-card spread, drawing two or three cards from each of the suits: 'Goals', 'Possibilities', 'Strategies', in that order. This spread will be more in-depth and can help further clarify a situation.

Pay particular attention to cards that are repeatedly selected. Often the questions also provide the answers, so it is useful to reflect upon recurring questions or discuss the possible significance with others.

FOR PROFESSIONALS

Professionals such as psychologists, counsellors, social workers and mental health practitioners may find the following activities useful:

Trigger questions: Use the cards when your client is stuck in a pessimistic loop or you have reached an impasse.

Starting therapeutic conversations: For clients who need support in starting a conversation or knowing where to go next in a conversation, the cards can gently provide a new direction for the conversation and help them get back on track.

Relationship counselling: Partners choose a series of cards for themselves (i.e. 3, 6 or 9-card spread) or for the other person as a starting point to conversation or for reflection and written responses.

Groups: Use the cards to create conversations about group goals and/or use them to discuss individual goals within the group. The group can then use the ‘Possibilities’ and ‘Strategies’ cards to help reach group goals or support group members to reach their personal goals.

Circle work: Place all the cards face down on the floor in the middle of circle, or just one subset of cards. One situation can be raised for all in the circle to consider, or each person can name their own situation. Each person then randomly selects a card and provides a response to the question in relation to the stated situation. Others can contribute their responses as appropriate.

Example

Client’s stated situation: ‘I hate counsellors.’
Card selected (‘Possibilities’) ‘What story am I telling myself about this?’ The client can then identify the narrative they have developed

about counsellors and/or others in the circle can provide their responses and all can identify a new, more helpful narrative.

FOR PARTNERS, FAMILIES, FRIENDS

At the dinner table: Use the cards when problems or difficulties are raised in a family group or between partners or friends. Cards can quickly change unhelpful conversations to more optimistic, helpful conversations that can lead to mutually satisfying solutions.

Decision making: The cards can help with decisions and support everyone to navigate through disagreements about a situation, as well as help generate a number of possibilities and strategies that may not have been considered in a problem-focussed conversation.

Example – three-card spread for families

Divide the card set into ‘Goals’, ‘Possibilities’ and ‘Strategies’. Place three piles face down in middle of the table. One family member starts by naming a situation that they want to discuss or resolve—it can be a personal or a family matter.

Situation: ‘Parents constantly arguing’. They then reveal three cards (one card from the top of each pile) and provide their response to the questions in relation to their stated situation. The spread could look like this:

First card (‘Goals’): ‘How much do I want things to change?’ The family member can then discuss how important it is for the parents to change their behaviour and how the arguments currently impact them.

Second card (‘Possibilities’): ‘How else could I look at this? What might I be overlooking?’ These questions can provide insight into other factors impacting on the parents, such as stress, work problems, scope and duration of the situation.

Third card (‘Strategies’): ‘What are others doing in similar circumstances?’ This can lead to solution talk, such as seeking counselling, finding other supports, and so on.

Others in the family also offer their responses to the same set of questions. After the first family member’s situation and set of three cards has been discussed, another family member can raise a different situation and proceed in the same manner, either in the same conversation or at another time.

FOR BUSINESS, CONSULTING, COACHING, MEETINGS, SUPERVISION AND PLANNING

There are many ways of using the cards to help with problem solving. Firstly, you can use an exercise to identify challenges or situations that need to be addressed. For example, have people write issues or challenges down on post-it notes. Once these are listed, cards can then be used to focus discussion and develop solutions.

Options include:

- use all the cards but divide them among the group or among particular issues
 - use only the 'Goals' cards to clarify objectives to be achieved
 - Once issues are identified, and goals established, use the 'Strategies' cards to generate solutions, actions and next steps.
- each person draws one card to focus discussion
 - use a three-card spread per issue (one 'Goals' card, one 'Possibilities' card, one 'Strategies' card)

The full set of cards

Here is a complete list of the cards and questions that make up the *Optimism Boosters* set.

GOALS

Questions for establishing realistic goals:

- What do I actually want to achieve?
- How would I prefer things to be, ideally?
- How can I make my goal more specific?
- How can I go for a smaller goal?
- Which parts of this are up to me?
- How much do I want things to change?
- What is already going well?
- What is the optimistic view of how things could turn out?
- What will it be like when things are the way I want them to be?
- Who will notice first when things improve?

POSSIBILITIES

Questions for seeing possibilities for change:

- What are the facts in this situation?
- What story am I telling myself about this?
- Where is the evidence for what I am telling myself?
- How else could I look at this? What might I be overlooking?
- What might an on-looker say about this?
- What is my part in creating the situation?
- Who would have a different perspective on this?
- What can I learn from this?
- How much will this matter in five years' time?
- What are the positive and humorous aspects of this situation?

STRATEGIES

Questions for generating action strategies:

- What is the first step towards achieving what I want?
- What have I done in the past that might help now?
- What can I do that is different?
- Who else could help me to change this?
- What are others doing in similar circumstances?
- What am I doing that has stopped things from getting worse?
- If my worst-case scenario happens, what will I do?
- What action will I take tomorrow?
- How can I enjoy the process while I change things?
- What can I do that others might not expect?

About the author

Selina Byrne is a consulting psychologist (Member of the Australian Psychological Society) and clinical nutritionist specialising in mood, energy and wellbeing solutions. Selina conducts her private practice, Selina Byrne Wellbeing Solutions, in Melbourne, Australia, working with people wanting to boost mood, address emotional concerns, raise energy levels, improve health, overcome stress or anxiety, develop better relationships and improve career prospects.

In addition to her work with individuals, couples and families, Selina also works on peak performance with athletes, students, musicians, actors and business people, addressing barriers to performance and designing strategies to boost success.

Selina is a regular speaker at conferences, seminars and professional development workshops, providing innovative, practical and action-oriented programs addressing staff and student wellbeing, optimism and resilience, influence skills, mood management, mood nutrition and the brain chemistry of motivation and success. Selina also provides training for teachers, psychologists, health practitioners and counsellors in how to incorporate mood boosting strategies into their work.

Selina is also the author of the highly popular card sets, *Anxiety Solutions* and *Anxiety Solutions for Kids*.

Please see more information at:

www.selinabyrne.com.au

Facebook: Selina Byrne Wellbeing Solutions.

About the publisher

St Luke's Innovative Resources is part of Anglicare Victoria, a community services organisation providing child, youth and family services in Victoria and New South Wales, Australia. We publish card sets, stickers, books, and digital and tactile materials to enrich conversations about feelings, strengths, relationships, values and goals. Our resources are for all people regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, ability or age. They are used by counsellors, educators, social workers, mentors, managers and parents. We also offer 'strengths approach' training and 'tools' workshops, both online and in-person.

www.innovativeresources.org

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'We can increase our level of optimism by learning the skills that natural optimists use, and this can actually help overcome and even prevent depressive episodes.'

SECOND EDITION:
NEW DESIGN,
LARGER CARDS,
EXPANDED BOOKLET
OF ACTIVITIES

OPTIMISM IS SOMETHING THAT YOU CAN 'DO'!

Open up fresh ways of thinking and feeling using this colourful and elegant set of thirty cards. These cards create powerful windows into change by asking questions about goals, possibilities and strategies for optimistic action. Place *Optimism Boosters* on your desk and dip into the cards when you need a boost from depressive thinking into optimistic possibilities!

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