Cultivating Optimism: How to Frame Your Future during a Health Challenge

When people are facing a health challenge, their optimism about recovering can have a huge impact on their mental and physical health. But despite the clear benefits, little is known about how to cultivate optimism about one's future health. Our research sought to tackle this question by focusing on the role that people's cultural background and mental frame have on their health-related optimism.

Imagining the steps one might take to achieve a goal can be an effective motivational tool, according to previous research. And in our studies, we wanted to better understand whether certain ways of imagining one's health recovery were more effective than others. We compared two common styles people use when imagining their health recovery. One is the initiator frame, which puts the person's focus on imagining how she will act, regardless of the situations or events she might encounter; and the other is the responder frame, which puts the person's focus on imagining how she will respond to the situations or events she might encounter. Importantly, we predicted that a person's culture predicts how optimistic they are likely to become after adopting one or the other of these frames.

People's cultural backgrounds have impact a wide variety of human activities, including emotions, behaviors, and thinking patterns. A key factor explaining these influences is the extent to which people are "independent" (self-focused) versus "interdependent" (group-focused), and this dimension reflects the extent to which people typically focus internally and think about their own behaviors in terms of the self, rather than typically focus externally and think about their behaviors in terms of the surrounding context or situation. With this in mind, we predicted that people from cultures that are traditionally "independent" (e.g., European Americans) experience greater optimism if they adopt an initiator frame when imagining their recovery, whereas people from cultures that are traditionally "interdependent" (e.g., Chinese) experience greater optimism if they adopt a responder frame when imagining their recovery. Underlying this prediction was our expectation that people would have an easier time visualizing the recovery process when they adopt a frame that fits with their typical perspective. And when it's easier for someone to imagine themselves undertaking the recovery process, they should believe that recovery is more likely to occur, boosting optimism.

Across six studies, we found support for these predictions: For people with independent cultural backgrounds, adopting an initiator (vs. responder) frame when facing a health challenge increased optimism about recovering, but for people with interdependent cultural backgrounds, adopting a responder (vs. initiator) frame increased optimism. And we found evidence that these effects are driven by the ease with which people could imagine their recovery process. Importantly, these optimism effects held for distinct health challenges (cancer, diabetes, flood-related illness, traumatic injury) across both single-country (e.g., Asian American vs. European American) and cross-country (e.g., USA vs. China) samples, and the greater optimism that people experienced was shown to positively impact a variety of health outcomes and decisions ranging from anticipated energy, physical endurance, and willingness to take on more challenging physical therapy to intentions to get vaccinated, stick to a doctor recommended diet, and undertake a physically strenuous vacation.