

The background of the slide features a blurred image of several people's silhouettes against a bright, warm sunset or sunrise sky. The people are captured in a celebratory pose, with their arms raised high in the air. The overall mood is one of joy and triumph.

Dr Charlotte Greenway

Optimism and pessimism

What is optimism and pessimism?

Optimism is a cognitive construct (expectancies regarding future outcomes) that also relates to motivation

Optimistic people exert effort, whereas pessimistic people disengage from effort.

The study of optimism began largely in health contexts, finding positive associations between optimism and markers of better psychological and physical health.

Physical health effects likely occur through differences in both health-promoting behaviours and physiological concomitants of coping.

Recently, the scientific study of optimism has extended to the realm of social relations: new evidence indicates that optimists have better social connections, partly because they work harder at them.

Learned optimism: Seligman

He turned his theory of learned helplessness on its head – you could learn to be optimistic



Helplessness occurs when you find yourself in an uncontrollable situation – you learn to become helpless because you expect events to be uncontrollable.



Learned helplessness happens when a person has learnt to attribute their failures in situations to internal, stable and global factors.

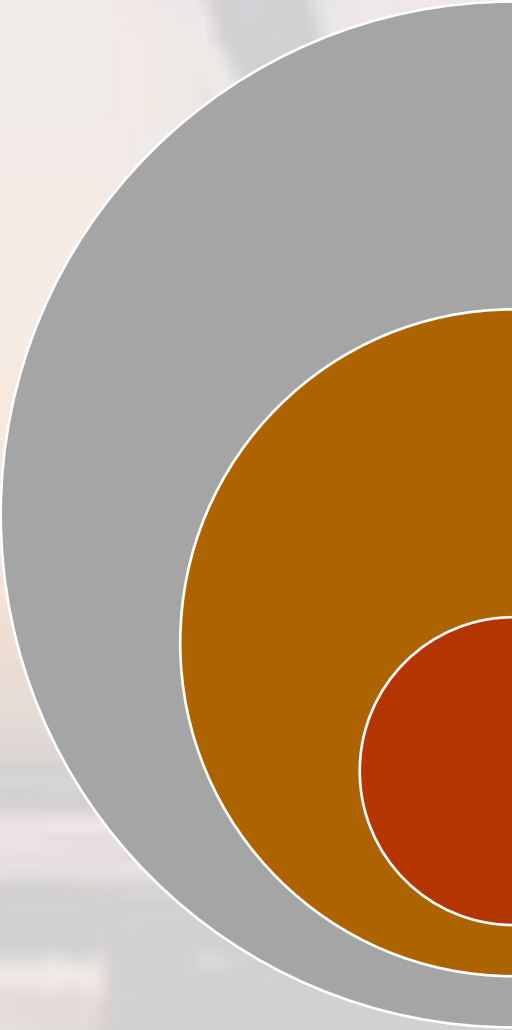
The way that you explain your problems and setbacks to yourself and choose either a positive or negative way to solve them



Eg. Lost job: economy is bad – redundant, unlucky ones or laid off because they think you didn't work hard enough or disliked.

**Learned optimism:
explanatory style**
(Seligman, 1991)

Learned optimism: explanatory style (Seligman, 1991)



How you interpret your job loss will have different effects on how you solve a problem – getting a new job.
First style: positive way of solving it, as there are no negative thoughts attached to the explanation.
Second style: negative thoughts = negative effects on getting future jobs.

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Learned optimism (Seligman, 1991)

Optimism and pessimism - habits of thinking and reveal your own personal explanatory style.

This style of thinking works on a continuum that goes from extreme pessimism right through to extreme optimism.

People tend to be either pessimistic or optimistic

Both sets of people may have the same life experiences, it is how they handle and think about those experiences that set them apart from each other.

Optimism is better than pessimism, but it's easier to be pessimistic.

The ABC format – Seligman

Adversity (A)

Forming beliefs about
adversity (B)

Consequences those
beliefs have (C)

Distraction and disputation – Seligman

Distraction - put
adversities aside to re-
evaluate the situation
and negate the
emotional issues

Disputation – used after
distraction, when the
person has had time to
calm down, to change
their beliefs about the
adversity

Dispositional Optimism (Carver and Scheier, 1981, 1985)



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graph LR; A[These expectancies have an influence on an individual's 'affective experience' and are considered to be a stable characteristic that an individual will display consistently across time and different contexts.] --> B[For this reason, dispositional optimism is important to how people deal with stress and coping.]; C[Scheier and Carver (1985) measure dispositional optimism versus pessimism using the Life Orientation Test (LOT)] --> D[Originally had 4 positively and 4 negatively worded items - over time = 4 filler items (neither pes or opt) - to stop you from guessing what the questionnaire is about and 3 positive and 3 negative items – asked to agree or disagree with them];
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For this reason, dispositional optimism is important to how people deal with stress and coping.

Scheier and Carver (1985) measure dispositional optimism versus pessimism using the Life Orientation Test (LOT)

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Optimism and Well-being

Coping and appraisals (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984)

When we are stressed – (1) we assess whether it is harmful or useful = primary or stress appraisals (2) we decide on how best to deal with the stress depending on how we have assessed that stress = secondary appraisals or coping strategies.

The individual then appraises whether the stressful situation represents the potential for the above three. If a person decides the situation is a threat or loss then the appraisal triggers secondary appraisals – which coping options or behaviours. These will depend on complexity of the situation, values, goals, novelty, social support and perceived controllability.

Primary appraisals (Fergusson et al., 1999)

What a person perceives and assesses as the possible effects of demands and resources on their well-being of that stressful situation e.g., emotional impact. It has three dimensions...

Threat: potential to harm you.

Loss: potential loss (friendship, health, self-esteem).

Challenge: potential for growth or benefits for the individual.

Coping strategies (secondary appraisals)

People use a variety of coping strategies.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) problem-focussed (engaged) and emotion-focussed (disengaged) coping.

problem solving by looking for logical and active ways to solve the stressful situations.

- weigh up the costs and benefits of actions, think of solutions, take actions to alter what is changeable and learn new skills.
- can be directed outward to change your environment or inward to change an aspect of yourself.

Emotion-focussed - coping strategies not directed at the stress

- instead directed at decreasing emotional distress caused by the stressful event (Rice, 2000).
- tactics such as avoiding the problem, distancing themselves from the problem, developing selective attention, seeking blame for the problem.
- minimising the problem, wishful thinking, venting and expressing emotions and seeking social support.

Both forms have advantages

- Research tends to support the view that it is always beneficial to use problem-focused over emotion-focussed.
- But when the situation is out of your control – emotion-focussed coping is useful

Benefits of optimism and well-being

Optimism – associated with the general sense of confidence and assistance

Pessimism – associated with characteristics of doubt and hesitancy

These characteristics tend to be amplified when faced with a serious adversity or stressful event

Optimists are positively related to problem-focused (engaged) coping strategies and negatively related to emotion-focused (disengaged) coping strategies (Aspinall and Taylor, 1992; Carver and Connor-Smith, 2010).

Optimists tend to adopt problem-solving coping and actively seek social support coping strategies, whilst also emphasising the positive aspects of the stressful event

Pessimists were found to adopt denial and avoidance coping; they also have pay too much attention to negative feelings and aspects of the stressful event (Scheier et al., 1986)

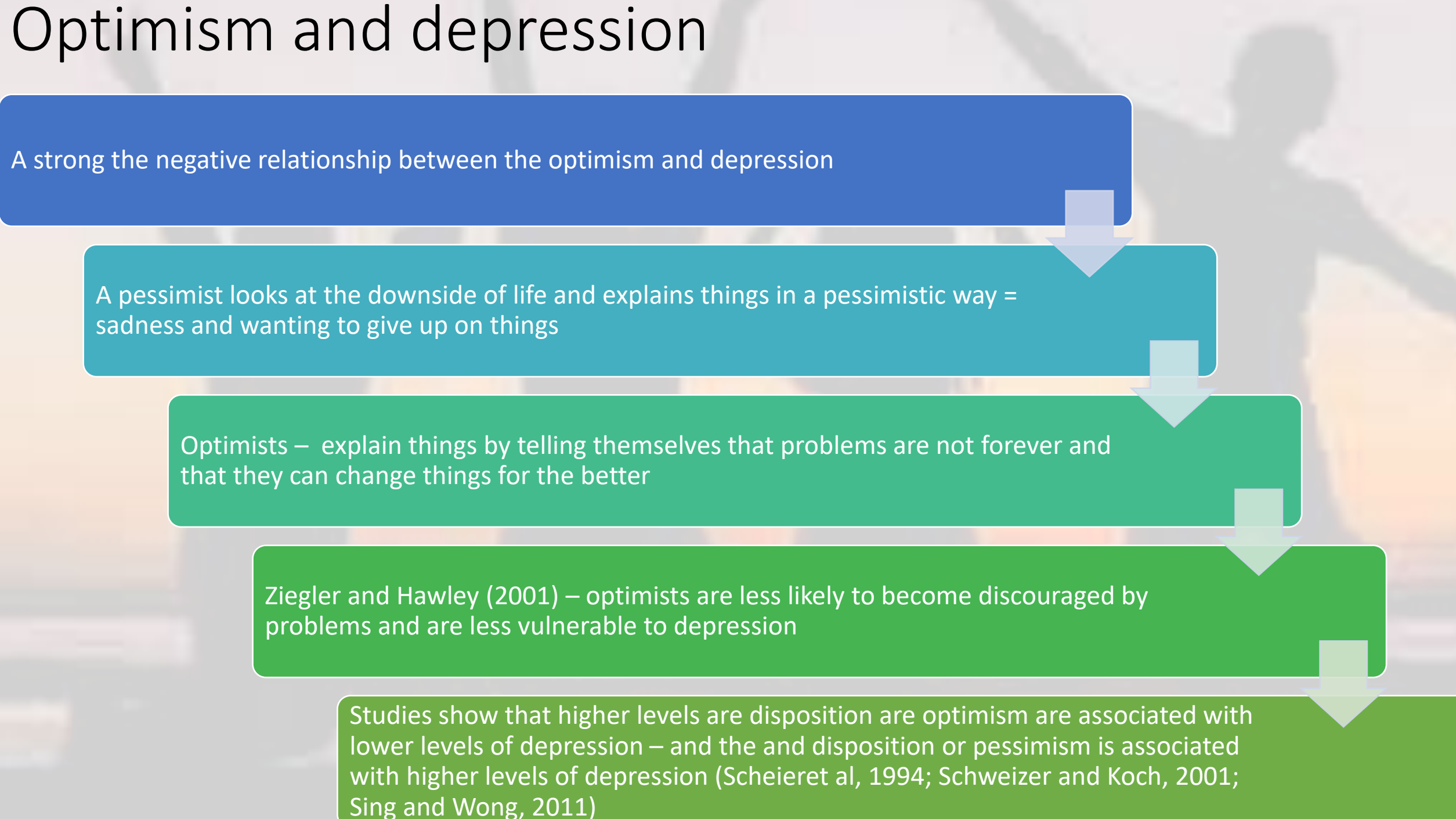
Research



Chang (2002) – the relationship between appraised stress over a previous month and psychological symptoms were significantly more exacerbated by pessimists than it was for optimists across age groups.
Schou et al (2005) – optimism is related to a better quality of life, to better psychological wellbeing, buffering against the harmful effects of body dissatisfaction, better exercise habits, and lower distress following surgery.
Optimists - use challenge appraisals over any other primary appraisal (threat or loss)
Carver and Connor-Smith, 2010 –optimism, extraversion, conscientiousness and openness together are related to more engagement coping; that neuroticism is related to more disengagement coping; and optimism, conscientiousness and agreeableness are together related to less disengagement coping.

Optimism and depression

A strong the negative relationship between the optimism and depression



A pessimist looks at the downside of life and explains things in a pessimistic way = sadness and wanting to give up on things

Optimists – explain things by telling themselves that problems are not forever and that they can change things for the better

Ziegler and Hawley (2001) – optimists are less likely to become discouraged by problems and are less vulnerable to depression

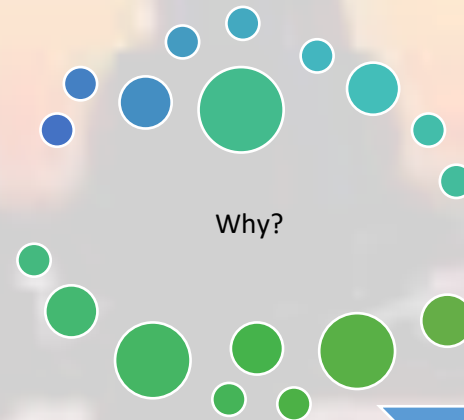
Studies show that higher levels are disposition are optimism are associated with lower levels of depression – and the and disposition or pessimism is associated with higher levels of depression (Scheier et al, 1994; Schweizer and Koch, 2001; Sing and Wong, 2011)

Optimism and Self-esteem

Self-esteem – how much a person likes accepts and respects themselves overall as a person

Optimists have high self-esteem and pessimists do not (Makikangas et al, 2004)

Overlaps between self-esteem and optimism – (1) to see which of the two variables has a larger effect on mental health (2) to sort out the effects of one of variables when considering the other variable's relationship mental health – results suggest that optimism is still a good predictor mental health when considered alongside its self-esteem (Leung et al., 2005).



They cope better with harmful perceived stress and are consequently more satisfied with life (Makikangas et al, 2004)

Resilience

Optimism effects in relationship

This is a relatively new area of work on optimism.



Optimists seem to work harder at relationships [Rand et al., 2011], consistent with their greater engagement in other high-priority tasks.

Neff and Geers (2013) - newlyweds - optimists engaged in more constructive problem solving than pessimists, both in a lab discussion of marital issues with their partner, and outside the lab on days when there was relationship conflict. They also had less decline in marital well-being over the first year of their marriage

Optimism effects in relationship

Optimists report having greater social support than do pessimists (Srivastava et al., 2006) but there is some indication that it is the perception of support that matters rather than the actual provision of support (Vollmann et al., 2011), .

Optimists thrive in a wide range of social conditions, with the result that optimism is related to greater network size, and to ties with others that cross age, educational, and racial boundaries [Andersson, 2012].

There is also evidence that this association works in both directions: having strong social networks can enhance optimism [Segerstrom, 2007]. The social effects of optimism can be far-reaching.

In one study, optimism (assessed 10 years previously) predicted greater resilience to developing loneliness late in life [Rius-Ottenheim et al., 2012].

Optimism effects in relationship

Optimism is associated with a warm and slightly dominant interpersonal style, which among men results in greater relationship satisfaction not only for themselves, but also for their wives [Smith et al., 2013].

A similar effect has been found for caregiver burden among wives of men about to undergo coronary artery bypass surgery [Ruis et al., 2006].

Optimists handle relationship crises more successfully than pessimists [Andersson, 2012] and they provide nurturant and involved parenting to their children [Heinonen et al. 2006; Taylor et al., 2012], resulting in better adjustment of the children.

Optimism and health

Much of the work on optimism has taken place in health-related contexts, as people confront the transitions imposed by health crises.

- The early work largely addressed the question of whether optimists fare better emotionally and psychologically than do pessimists when confronting health problems, and confirmed that the answer is yes [Carver et al., 2010].
- However, more recently, research has addressed the question of whether optimism also predicts physical health [Rasmussen et al., 2009].
- Many of these studies take the form of epidemiological research (the study of how often diseases occur in different groups of people and why), looking at long-term prospective associations between optimism and health outcomes in large samples.

Optimism and health



Cardiovascular disease using data from the Women's Health Initiative (WHI)-examined quality of life, chronic disease, morbidity, and mortality among over 95 000 women across an 8-year period [Tindle et al., 2005].



All of the women were free of cardiovascular disease and cancer at study entry. Optimists were less likely than pessimists to develop coronary heart disease (CHD), were less likely to die from CHD-related causes, and had lower total mortality due to all causes, across the 8 years of study.

Situational optimism

The expectations that an individual generates for a particular situation concerning whether good rather than bad things will happen (MacArthur and MacArthur, 2002)

Dispositional optimism have much more generalised positive beliefs about the future – they expect good things to happen within every aspect of their lives

Situational optimists tend to have specific positive beliefs about certain events - they expect good things to happen within specific areas of their lives

Seegerstrom et al (1998)

- 140 law students
- Situational optimists, rather than the dispositional optimists, are there seemed to demonstrates a more positive relationship with better mental health

Measurement – assessing expectations about outcomes that are linked to particular contexts (situations). Items vary from situation to situation – the researcher adjusts the questions asked in the items depending on the situation being measured

Nature vs. Nurture

Heritability estimates hover around 30%, [Plomin, 1992; Mosing et al. 2010].

Associations between optimism and longevity may also have genetic underpinnings [Mosing et al. 2012].

Researchers have been trying (with mixed success) to identify specific genomic elements that might underlie variations in optimism and pessimism.

- One study [Rius-Ottenheim, 2012] implicated the oxytocin receptor gene (rs53576), but this finding failed to replicate in another study [Cornelis et al. 2012].
- A haplotype for the mineralocorticoid receptor gene, which helps to regulate stress arousal, has also been related to optimism in one study, but only among men [Klok et al. 2011].
- The only published genome-wide study to date [Eriksson et al. 2010] failed to identify any correlate of optimism.

Nature vs. Nurture

On the environmental side, early childhood experience has also been linked to adult optimism.

This research [Heinonen et al. 2006] measured optimism in a cohort of adults aged 24–27 years.

Childhood SES predicted optimism in adulthood, even after controlling for adult SES.

SES of the participants' families during their early childhood (ages 3–6 years) as well as the participants' current SES.

An apparently unexamined possibility is whether **optimism is cultivated directly through parental transmission** (e.g., through parental modeling).

Another possibility is that optimism could arise via **instruction from parents** to children on the use of adaptive coping strategies.

Use of such strategies might lead to coping successes, thereby laying the foundation for future optimism. It would also be useful to explore these possibilities in future research.

Is optimism ever bad?

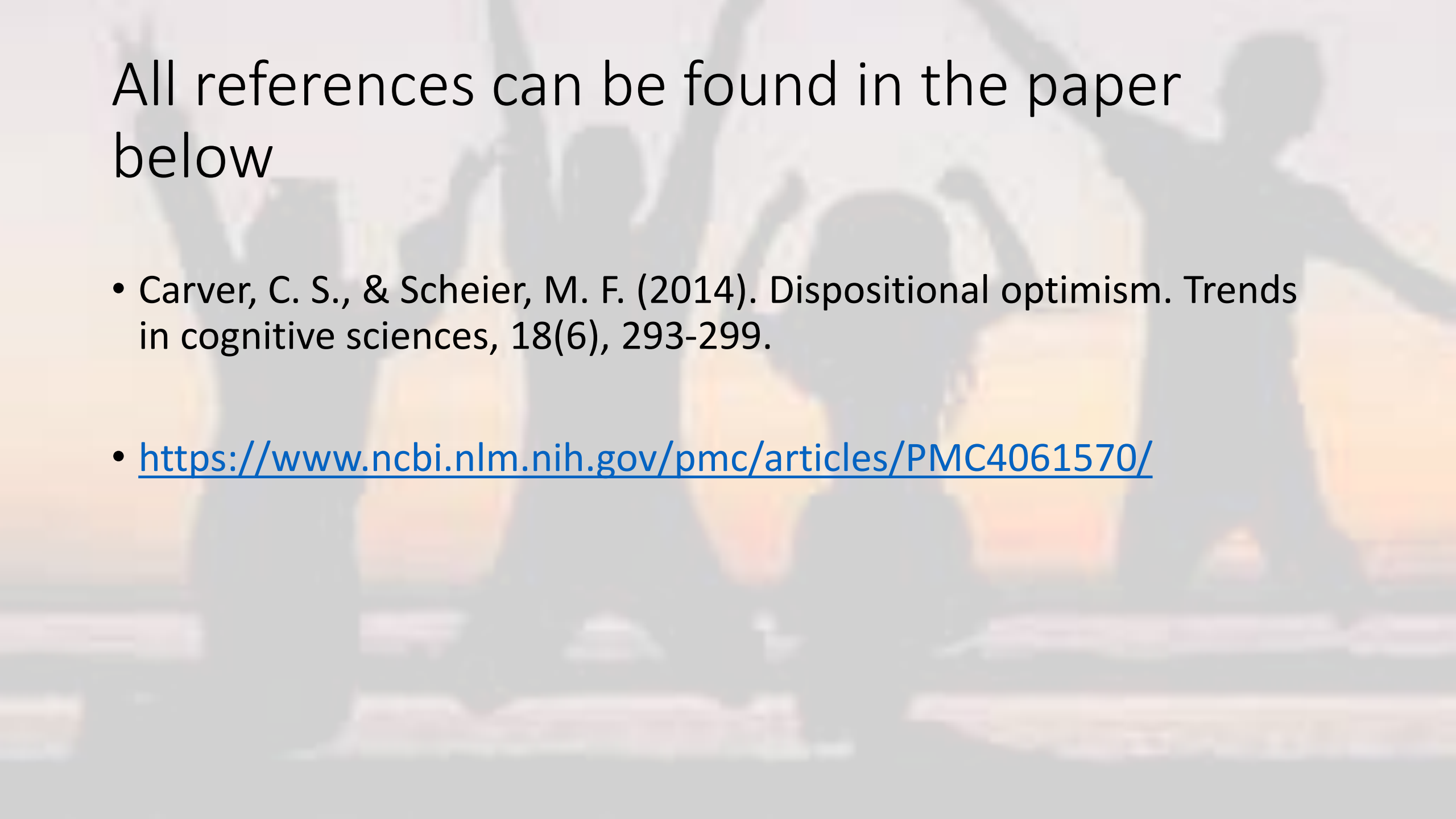
Recent findings come from contexts in which too much confidence and persistence might create problems

Are
optimists
ever worse
off than
pessimists
?

Thus - 'things are bad now,
but they will get better'
promotes better functioning
than 'things are bad now and
they are going to stay that
way.'

No evidence that supports it
— because optimists endorse
the belief that a stressful
present can change to a
better future [Chang et al.
2013].

Gambling - optimists had more positive expectations for gambling than did pessimists, and were less likely to reduce their betting after poor outcomes [Gibson and Sanbonmatsu, 2004]. Participants in that research were not people with actual gambling problems. However, the outcome suggests the possibility of a vulnerability to such problems.



All references can be found in the paper below

- Carver, C. S., & Scheier, M. F. (2014). Dispositional optimism. Trends in cognitive sciences, 18(6), 293-299.
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4061570/>