



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

# The Stepping Stone

August 2012 – Issue 47

# You, Too, Can Be an Optimist

by Doreen Stern, Ph.D.

“I wanna read this book,” I exclaimed out loud, even though I was sitting in the library at Manchester Community College, after my writing group had ended. It didn’t matter to me. A book about optimism mentioned in *The New York Times* by science correspondent Jane Brophy, called out to me. Maybe it could help me finish the book I’m writing. Or form the foundation for this article, due a week hence, which I intended to submit early. Or perhaps light a candle in my life. So I jumped up and hurried over to the reference desk.

“I’m looking for *Breaking Murphy’s Law* by S. Segerstrom,” I told the prim woman sitting behind a computer. “Do you have it, or can you tell me which library does?”

I must confess: Searching for obscure books is standard operating procedure for me. You see, I’m trained as a researcher. Plus eons ago I won the “Librarian of the Year” award in my 1,500-student high school graduating class, when I didn’t even know such an honor existed. Paradoxically, I was also nominated for “Football Queen.” Go figure. Both experiences probably helped shape who I am today.

Last Tuesday, the reference librarian slowly shook her head in response to my query. “Hartford Public has it, and Connecticut State University,” she said, mentioning two local libraries.

O.K., I thought. *Hartford Public is on my way home. It would be good to stop there anyway*, recalling how that morning, when I’d tried to renew a book over the phone, a man had informed me that a volume I believed I’d returned was still marked as outstanding on my record. That’s the kind of thing that’s best to resolve in person.

A two-edged sword awaited me in Hartford. A circulation assistant easily found the book still charged to my card on the “New Nonfiction shelf,” but there was no sign of Segerstrom’s offering. Perhaps a patron had walked off in an effort to become more optimistic.

Yet all was not lost: the assistant printed out a list of the 12 libraries in Connecticut that had her book.

I noted that that one of them, St. Joseph’s College, was located less than two miles from where I live. Surprisingly, I’d never been there. A quick Google search yielded the phone number, which I tapped into my iPhone. That way I could inquire about the book’s availability and the library’s borrowing policies.

“Yes, we own the book, but you have to be a St. Jo’s student to check out material from our library,” the person who answered the phone said. “You’re more than welcome to read it here, though.”

O.K., I reflected, *time for a visit to St. Joseph’s College*.

When I arrived on campus, I happily parked in an open spot labeled, “Reserved for Visitors.” *That’s me, right?* I smirked.

I soon spied a good-looking, muscled 20-something male whom I questioned about the library’s whereabouts. “Make a right turn at the end of the sidewalk, and the library’s straight down on the left,” he said. Easy.

Finally, I pulled open the building’s heavy door and asked a young woman sitting behind the circulation desk in the 1950s-era red brick building for the book. She rose to retrieve it, and placed it in my hand, with a smile. Then she pointed me toward an elegant reading room.

When I cracked open the book, I discovered that my pilgrimage to the Pope Pius XII Library at St. Joseph’s College, was a vivid example of how to boost one’s inherent optimism: **set a goal and take action**. And keep at it.

Why? It improves your state of mind. Dramatically.

Optimism, I learned, is not a positive emotion like happiness; rather, it’s a belief about the future.



Dr. Doreen Stern is a motivational speaker, writer and success coach in Hartford, Conn. She is currently working on a book titled, *Change Your Life in 17 Minutes!* She can be reached at [DoreenStern.com](mailto:DoreenStern.com), or at (860) 293-1619.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 28

Optimistic people believe that more good things will come to them than bad; that things will go their way; and that the future will turn out the way they hope, or maybe even better. Also, optimists believe that uncertainty is an opportunity for circumstances to improve, rather than plunge them into darkness.

Furthermore, optimistic *beliefs* set up a positive feedback loop: the more confident folks are, the more they can expect to experience the rosy future they imagine.

Now, here's the fascinating thing I learned: optimism isn't about cheerfulness or good moods: **No, it's about motivation and persistence.**

According to Segerstrom, persistence is the road that leads to more optimism and happiness. "How can that be?" you might ask, just as I did.

Whether you decide to put in more or less effort depends on your expectations. If you think your

efforts will produce positive outcomes, you're more likely to put your nose to the grindstone. But if you think your efforts will come to naught, you're unlikely to exert the effort.

Yet in pressing forward, you change. You change your view of the world, and what you believe you can accomplish. You can even change your brain's neural networks.

Think back to your own experience with your actuarial exams: Did your expectation that you'd pass your exams help you put in the long hours required to do so? Or did you sometimes languish in self-doubt, berating yourself that you should be doing more? But not mounting the necessary effort?

No matter what your experiences were then, you CAN become more optimistic starting this very day! Here's how: Identify a goal, one that's important to you, which will increase your autonomy, competence and relatedness. These are called "intrinsic" goals (as opposed to "extrinsic" ones that focus on attaining wealth, fame and image).

Take small steps toward the goal you've set, just like I did in obtaining a copy of Segerstrom's book. When obstacles arise, as they undoubtedly will, get back on the path.

Here's an example of one of my intrinsic goals that I've had difficulty achieving: going to sleep earlier. Bedtime comes and goes, with me still writing, reading or even trying on clothes. How do you think I feel the next day? If the words exhausted, spent or grouchy come to mind, you've hit the nail on the head. I've decided to change – to shut my light off at 10:30 – to brighten every moment of my life.

Here are the actions I intend to take to achieve my goal: First, to turn off my computer at 8:00 each night, and not restart it until the next morning. If a pressing concern crosses my mind, I'll merely write it down in a spiral notebook I keep on my desk.



Second, to remind myself of my resolve, I've set two alarms on my iPhone—one for 7:40 in the evening, as a warning that it's time to finish up what I'm working on. And another for 9:30, to remind myself it's close to stopping time for whatever I'm doing.

Third, knowing my recalcitrance to call a halt to any activity in which I'm engaged, even knitting or reading, I've set the alarm on my bedroom clock for 9:45: It will tell me it's time to start running my bath (baths relax me).

After my bath, I intend to read for a few minutes, and then shut off my light promptly at 10:30. (Yes, I'll set another alarm for that.)

Now I know this sounds like a lot of work for a relatively easy activity, like going to sleep earlier,

but I've been down this road before. Plus I know that research shows that when we identify the exact steps we'll take to complete a task, the likelihood of our achieving our cherished goal increases by leaps and bounds.

This time I plan to succeed, since it will increase my optimism. And show me that even things I've failed at before are possible.

How about you? What intrinsic goal will you set today, and which small steps will you take to achieve it?

One last thing: I'm excited to tell you that I did indeed achieve my goal of submitting this article early—three days before the due date—a watershed achievement for me! ●