

CHAPTER 1

Optimal Thinking: The Next Step Beyond Positive Thinking

Do you enjoy the best life has to offer or are you stuck with a life of compromise and substitutes?

Optimal Thinking is for all who want to be their best and enjoy the best in life. If you are willing to optimize your life by making the most of your thinking, *Optimal Thinking* is for you!

Many people would love to experience the ultimate relationship but find themselves settling for second best. Some people want to make the most of their professional lives, but are making only limited progress. They dream of all the rewards of financial success, yet are restricted by tight budgets. Others are overworked, trapped in the wrong jobs, and unfulfilled at home.

Optimal Thinking is not just another self-improvement book. It is your definitive guide for self-optimization—a quantum leap! This book does not make assumptions about what is important to you, but instead offers an approach to empower you to discover your highest priorities and create your own best solutions. You'll learn how to ask yourself and others the best questions to make the most of everyday situations. You'll learn a style of thinking that provides the best chance of creating anything and everything you will ever want.

So where do we start? Let's explore the various levels of sub-optimal thinking and then compare the results with those you can experience with *Optimal Thinking*.

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Suboptimal Thinking

You have, I'm sure, practiced a wide variety of thinking before you decided to read this book. You may have noticed that your thinking is not always in your own best interest. Are you aware of your current thought mix? How much do you identify with the following thinking styles?

Negative Thinking

Do you sometimes find yourself thinking negatively about yourself, about others, or about circumstances? Is your focus on what's wrong, on limitations, or on destructive viewpoints? Although negative thinking is often detrimental and scorned by many in society today, *it is valuable*. Negative thinking enables us to define and express our vulnerability, integrate trauma, and grieve the meaningful losses in our lives. It also warns us of imminent danger. Negative thinking cautions us against investing our hard-earned money in fraudulent get-rich-quick schemes, or against diving into deep water when we don't know how to swim. It is necessary in any design process to anticipate flaws in products, services, and projects so that they can be rectified.

We all think negatively from time to time. Do you experience worry, depression, or blame? Do you complain, criticize, or use words like "can't" and "won't"? Are you ever unreasonable? Do you direct your anger at people who have nothing to do with its cause or solution? Negative thinking can be very *destructive*. Negative thinkers often waste valuable ideas and opportunities for success by dwelling on why things can't be done. They anticipate failure in their endeavors and use their losses to validate their pessimistic perspective. They see life as a series of problems, focus on what they don't have, and are usually unhappy.

All of us experience varying degrees of negativity. Sometimes we have a few doubts about the workability of a situation, while at other times we are convinced that it *can't* work—under any circumstances. When we believe that what we want is unattainable or that whatever we do won't make any difference, we feel helpless. Here are some examples:

Craig, a real estate agent, has been divorced twice. During each marriage he created havoc because he couldn't control his temper. Now, lonely and disillusioned, he is afraid of intimacy and sabotages relationships with women. He doesn't believe that he can make a committed relationship work.

Miles sold his chiropractic practice after he broke his arm. He then invested in several unsuccessful business ventures where he was misguided and defrauded. He now feels hopeless, and believes that the grass will turn brown even where he waters it.

Some people have a slightly negative disposition whereas others are extraordinarily negative. How much of *your* time is spent thinking negatively? _____%

Positive Thinking

Are you a positive thinker? Are you confident and self-assured? Is your thinking constructive and productive? When evaluating a situation, do you focus on the bright side? Do you think in terms of victory and success? Positive thinkers see themselves as good, loving, productive, competent, and worthy of life's favorable offerings. They concentrate on the value in themselves, in others, and in the world. They focus on how things *can* be done—and make them happen. They approach life with a “can do” and “will do” attitude, believing that the grass will turn green where they water it.

Consider Heather, a positive thinker. As an aspiring actress in her early forties, Heather believed that her age would help rather than hinder her. She took acting lessons from well-regarded teachers and zealously refined her craft. She approached each day enthusiastically and auditioned for roles whenever she could. For Heather, each audition provided an opportunity to display her talent. Believing that success would soon be hers, she persisted through numerous temporary setbacks and developed confidence as an actress. One day she was offered an important role in a high-budget film. She excelled in that role and went on to become a successful actress.

We all know that positive thinking can motivate us to be productive, efficient, and successful. But there are varying shades of positive thinking. Let's examine some of them.

Mediocre Thinking

You may be a positive thinker, yet your thinking could, in fact, be mediocre. Do you think you're quite good at your job? Are you a pretty good family person, friend, or athlete? Is your thinking rarely unusual? Do you feel comfortable being one of the crowd? American business writer Lou Vickery believes: “Nothing average ever stood as a monument to progress. When progress is looking for a partner it doesn't turn to those who believe that they are only average. It turns instead to those who are forever searching and striving to become the best they possibly can. If we seek the average level, we

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cannot hope to achieve a higher level of success. Our only hope is to avoid being a failure.”

Here is a typical example of such a mediocre thinker:

Mary, a good-hearted woman, owns a modest home, drives an ordinary car, and lives a reasonably comfortable life. She doesn’t aspire to the best things in life because she doesn’t believe she could ever have them. Although she has some worthwhile goals, she is not excited about achieving them. She gets along quite well with others because she avoids conflict and does not make waves. Mary’s mediocre thinking began early in life because, sadly, her parents constantly denigrated her intellect, behavior, and aspirations. She was continually told that she couldn’t have what she wanted and that she must compromise. To this day Mary avoids taking actions that might evoke disapproval from others. Having settled for second best all her life, at forty-four she has not overcome her early restrictive conditioning.

Are you a mediocre thinker? When people ask you how you are, do you automatically respond with “not bad,” “okay,” or “pretty good”? Many people are in the habit of responding in mediocre terms instead of considering their options and figuring out a reply that is in their best interest. Best-selling author Stephen Covey suggests: “You have to decide what your highest priorities are and have the courage—pleasantly, smilingly, non-apologetically—to say ‘no’ to other things. And the way you do that is by having a bigger ‘yes’ burning inside. The enemy of the ‘best’ is often the ‘good.’”

Mediocre thinkers are regular people who feel comfortable being considered average in their thinking and actions. Their style of thinking is generally moderate and conservative. American actor and critic Uta Hagen believes: “We must overcome the notion that we must be regular. It robs us of the chance to be extraordinary and leads us to the mediocre.”

Most people are committed to this middle-of-the-road form of thinking. Others simply tinker with it. How much of your time do you devote to mediocre thinking? _____%

Extraordinary Thinking

Does extraordinary thinking describe you? Do you think in terms of being more than ordinary, unusually great, exceptional? Do you prefer to think beyond the realms of mediocrity? Do you like to challenge the limited thinking of most people? Do words like “remarkable,” “brilliant,” “outstanding,” “great,” and “high achiever” describe you?

Extraordinary thinkers achieve exceptional results in all walks of life because they don't settle for the ordinary. Former NASA astronaut Dr. Mae Jemison was the first African American woman to venture into space. She admits: "My mission is to make unique contributions." Well-known real estate developer Donald Trump claims: "As long as you're going to be thinking anyway, think big." According to former Soviet and Russian political leader Boris Yeltsin, "It is especially important to encourage unorthodox thinking when the situation is critical: At such moments every new word and fresh thought is more precious than gold."

By listening carefully, you can identify extraordinary thinkers. Recently the chief executive officer of a large and successful oil corporation came to my office for a business consultation. His response to the question "What is the primary purpose of your company?" was "to create *exceptionally high* returns for our shareholders" as part of his overall statement. He was an extraordinary thinker.

Many extraordinary thinkers refuse to give in to seemingly insurmountable limitations and obstacles. Thomas Edison invented the electric lightbulb when everyone believed it wasn't possible. He succeeded after ten thousand attempts. When the world believed it couldn't be done, Roger Bannister ran the mile in four minutes. We don't know exactly how these people achieved their successes, but we do know that they courageously challenged and surpassed the conventional thinking of their time. Their extraordinary thinking may or may not have produced the best possible outcome, but it certainly provided the mental foundation for exceptional results.

Does this describe you? How much of your time is invested in extraordinary thinking? _____ %

By now, you are probably wondering how positive thinking differs from Optimal Thinking. Read on to learn that when you compare the levels of positive thinking—even extraordinary thinking—to Optimal Thinking, positive thinking is suboptimal!

What Is Optimal Thinking?

"Wisdom denotes the pursuit of the best ends by the best means."

—Francis Hutcheson

Have any of these thoughts ever crossed your mind?

- I deserve the best in life.
- How can I make the most of this situation?

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- What's the best solution?
- I'm taking the smartest actions toward my most important goal.
- I'm doing my best.
- I'm maximizing my options.
- What's the most constructive use of my time right now?

If you entertain such thoughts, please welcome yourself into the Optimal Thinking community.

Optimal Thinking is the language of your highest self. It empowers you to be your best and stops you from settling for second best. With Optimal Thinking, your highest self takes charge. You focus on the best or most constructive thought at all times. You choose your best option in any given moment and experience the results of your own best thoughts. When thinking Optimally, you are not concerned with others' concepts of "the best." You are not in competition with anyone. You are concerned with what "the best" means to you and you attach your own value to it. Of course, "the best" has a different meaning for each of us. When considering the purchase of a gift for a loved one or coworker, one Optimal Thinker may think that the best choice is the highest quality available, and isn't concerned with price. Another may choose the gift that offers the most value relative to price.

When you use this superlative form of thinking, you are aligned with your highest level of creativity—and creation. You can choose the best actions to accomplish what's most important to you. You automatically use words like "best," "wisest," "greatest," "most productive," "supreme," and "maximize." Here is the quantum leap!

Suboptimal Positive Thinking

good, better
great
high, higher
smart, smarter
important
enjoyable
profitable
effective
improve, manage, increase
outstanding

Optimal Thinking

best
greatest
highest, peak, top
smartest
most important
most enjoyable
most profitable
most effective
maximize, optimize, make
the most of
most outstanding

You can employ Optimal Thinking to instantly make the most of your life by asking questions like:

- What is most important to me?
- What's my major objective?
- Which resources will be most beneficial in helping me to achieve it?
- What are my greatest talents and abilities?
- How can I make the best use of them?
- What is the most constructive action I can take right now?
- Who are the right people with whom to share my goals and dreams?
- How can I optimize my gratitude for life?

With Optimal Thinking, you can also bring out the best in others. Just focus on the best ways to help them achieve what's most important to them. In Optimal interactions, when someone is off track, ask the "best" questions to help them find the best resolution. For example:

- What's the best way to handle this?
- What's the best solution?
- What's your highest priority right now?
- What's the best opportunity you can act upon right now?

If you run a business, you can maximize its success using Optimal Thinking. You will need to define your business in terms of its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, values, objectives, and plans by answering Optimal questions like:

- What are the greatest strengths of this company?
- Who are our most valuable employees?
- Who are our best customers?
- What are their most important needs?
- What are our most beneficial products/services?
- What are our most profitable products/services?
- How can we make the most of these strengths?
- What are our greatest weaknesses?
- What's the best way to minimize them?

Who Thinks Optimally?

We are all Optimal Thinkers. Some of us use Optimal Thinking from time to time, others use it more frequently, but most of us don't

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use it consistently. Until now, this peak form of thinking has not been acknowledged or structured. That's why I coined the term Optimal Thinking. We all know that green is a color that is seen frequently in nature. Once we know that green is created when blue and yellow are combined, it's easy to reproduce it consistently. Similarly, once we identify Optimal Thinking as a specific form of thinking and understand its structure, we can use it consistently.

What's most exciting about Optimal Thinking is that you can use it at any time and in any place. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to be an Optimal Thinker. It doesn't matter what stage of life you are in, or in what circumstance you find yourself. You can use Optimal Thinking to *instantly make the most of your life*.

Consider Brian and Lynn, both physicians and Optimal Thinkers, who have been happily married for twenty years. When asked about the success of their relationship, Lynn said, "We take complete responsibility for our own feelings and behavior, and do our best to make the relationship the best it can be. Our favorite phrases are, 'What's our highest priority? What is best for both of us?'" Brian explained, "Whenever we have an argument, we embrace the present moment, observe our inner reactions, and explore what we are doing to cause them. We then figure out the best solution for both of us."

Optimal Thinking can be used to make the most of any situation. A perfect example is Gerry, a football player and Optimal Thinker, who was suffering from a severe knee injury. His doctor told him that he would risk further injury if he didn't take sufficient time to recover. To make the right decision, Gerry asked himself the following Optimal questions: "What's in my best interest? What's best for the team? What's the best solution?"

When the chief executive officer of a leading telecommunications company described the primary purpose of his company, he said: "To *maximize* returns to our shareholders." I knew he was an Optimal Thinker.

Do You Recognize These Optimal Thinkers?

History books are crammed with Optimal Thinkers from every walk of life. Albert Einstein encouraged us to live according to an Optimal standard. He said: "We have to do the best we can. This is our sacred human responsibility." American industrialist Harvey Samuel Firestone held an Optimal human relations perspective. He believed: "You get the best out of others when you give the best of

yourself.” Jordan’s King Hussein I understood his highest priorities. He wrote: “Above all, I believe in God. I believe also, that I must live with myself. I must be able to face myself each morning and say: ‘I did my best yesterday. I will do my best again today.’” Benjamin Franklin put Optimal Thinking to work when he said, “An investment in knowledge pays the best interest.” And after eight years of unprecedented economic expansion in the United States, Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan restated his main objective, “to achieve maximum sustainable economic growth.”

Optimal Thinkers are everywhere. Below is a selection of Optimal Thinking from well-known people and businesses.

American Political Leaders

“In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing. The worst thing you can do is nothing.”

—*Theodore Roosevelt*

“I come to the office each morning and stay for long hours doing what has to be done to the best of my ability. And when you’ve done the best you can you can’t do any better.”

—*Harry S. Truman*

“To those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required.”

—*John F. Kennedy*

“I will do my best. That is all I can do. I ask for your help—and God’s.”

—*Lyndon B. Johnson*

“Never be satisfied with less than your very best effort. If you strive for the top and miss, you’ll still ‘beat the pack.’”

—*Gerald Ford*

“I am not a perfect servant. I am a public servant doing my best against the odds. As I develop and serve, be patient. God is not finished with me yet.”

—*Jesse Louis Jackson*

Performers and Sports People

“Living your best life is your most important journey in life.”

“Doing the best at this moment puts you in the best place for the next moment.”

—*Oprah Winfrey*

“A problem is a chance for you to do your best.”

—*Duke Ellington*

“Things turn out best for the people who make the best out of the way things turn out.”

—*Art Linkletter*

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“Go in there and do the best you can. That’s all you can do.”

—*Tiger Woods*

“When she (my mother) passed away, I kind of understood the commitment that she made to make sure that I could stay in skating. And I wanted to live up to whatever I could. Not so much win everything, but just to be the best that I could possibly be, to honor her memory and everything she went through to make sure that I was given the opportunities to be the best that I can be. Not to be a world champion or an Olympic gold medalist, but to be the best that I could be. And that was the most important thing that ever happened in my career.” —*Scott Hamilton*

Corporations

Many well-known companies use Optimal slogans to publicize Optimal standards.

Air New Zealand—The world’s warmest welcome

Amazon.com—Earth’s biggest selection

Barclays Bank—The best bankers in business

BMW—The ultimate driving machine

CNBC—The world leader in business news

Gillette—The best a man can get

Kelloggs—The simple things in life are often the best

Sharp—Simply the best

Do you think like this? If so, how much of your time is invested in Optimal Thinking? _____%

Take the Quantum Leap!

“We are shaped by our thoughts. We become what we think.”

—Buddha

One of the most exciting aspects of Optimal Thinking is that at this very moment and at any time in the future, you can optimize your thinking. Just as you can choose to think suboptimally—positively or negatively—you can choose to think Optimally. You can easily take the quantum leap!

Imagine you agree to meet a friend for dinner at an average restaurant. Your choice of dress is mediocre. The restaurant is moderately attractive and the chairs are reasonably comfortable. The

food is somewhat ordinary, nothing to write home about. The background music is okay. Your friend is basically a suboptimal thinker. She talks about her husband for most of the evening. She tells you that he is giving her a hard time and that she's fed up. She even cracks some pretty good jokes at his expense. You listen and agree that he's a jerk. You don't attempt to find a solution. Let's tune in on part of the conversation:

Suboptimal Thinker: My husband is really getting me down. He treats me well sometimes, but he's emotionally abusive. I'm tired of walking on eggshells around him. When it comes to our relationship, he always gives his full thirty-four percent!

Suboptimal You: He's a jerk. Why do you put up with him?

Suboptimal Thinker: I'm afraid of being alone, and I don't believe I'll find anyone better.

Suboptimal You: If that's how you feel, I guess you're just going to have to grin and bear it.

How do you both feel now?

Now imagine yourself as an Optimal Thinker. You arrange to meet the same friend for dinner at your favorite restaurant. You are looking your best. The ambience is just right and the seating is entirely comfortable. You agree that the food couldn't be better. The resident pianist even plays your favorite music.

Your friend shares her problem. You direct the conversation toward discovering the best solution and the most effective actions to implement. You assist your friend in minimizing her weaknesses and maximizing her strengths and opportunities. You focus on her finest attributes, favorite activities, and the best means of achieving her most important goals. You bring out the best in her! Let's tune in now to your Optimal responses to your friend's comments:

Suboptimal Thinker: My husband is really getting me down. He treats me well sometimes, but he's emotionally abusive. I'm tired of walking on eggshells around him. When it comes to our relationship, he always gives his full thirty-four percent!

Optimal You: It sounds like you're having a really hard time. I have three questions for you. Why are you tolerating his bad behavior? What are your options? What do you think is the best way to resolve this?

Suboptimal Thinker: I'm scared he'll leave me, and I'm afraid of being alone. I guess I have three options. I can put up with

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his lousy behavior, stand up to him, or leave. I really need to overcome my fear of being alone, and show him that I won't tolerate his nasty behavior.

Optimal You: That sounds like a good place to start. What's the most constructive way to approach this so that you can achieve what's best for both of you?

Suboptimal Thinker: Good question. I need to explore why I am so afraid of being alone, and then figure out how to overcome my fear. I also need to stand up for myself. The next time my husband is emotionally abusive, I'll say: "I love you, but this behavior is no longer acceptable to me. I can't be available for this. When you're ready to treat me respectfully, please let me know." If he continues to treat me badly, I will remove myself from his presence.

How do you both feel now? How does it feel to be your best and bring out the best in others? This is what Optimal Thinking is all about! With practice, Optimal Thinking will become second nature to you.

Why Positive Thinking Falls Short

For decades, the motto of the productive world has been "Think positive!" Meanwhile, the divorce rate has increased, highly intelligent people are unhappy, and our leaders' morals and ethics are often considered dubious. It's time to acknowledge that *positive thinking is not enough*.

Let's look at five reasons why positive thinking falls short and how Optimal Thinking resolves these shortcomings.

1. Positive Thinking Is Often Used to Suppress Negativity

Many positive thinkers often judge, suppress, and ignore negativity. They want to hear the good news only and alienate themselves from any negative thoughts or feelings. Such positive thinkers may have many concerns about their financial situation but choose to ignore them. You have probably heard these people say, "I don't want to hear any negativity!" They do not want to face the truth. By alienating themselves from negativity, they sacrifice authenticity, vulnerability, wholeness, and intimacy.

Recently, a business executive informed me that two years ago he told his family that he was tired of listening to their negative

thinking. Subsequently, whenever he walked into the living room, dead silence prevailed. His family had stopped sharing their problems and concerns with him, and he became an outsider.

Some years ago, I had a similar experience within a well-known international company. The vice president repeatedly said, "Stay away from negative people. If you want to fly with eagles, don't mix with turkeys!" The employees were expected to show enthusiasm at all times. Whenever anyone expressed thoughts or feelings of doubt, anxiety, or unhappiness, they were labeled "negative," and were denigrated and disregarded.

Negative thoughts and feelings are not resolved when we suppress, deny, or devalue them. We just function with layers of unresolved problems, which affects our morale, stress level, productivity, and teamwork. It's like putting a coat of fresh paint over rust. Sooner or later, the paint peels off and the rust resurfaces. *Suppressing negativity with positive thinking can be very harmful.* Many positive thinkers experience severe emotional and financial distress because they ignore negative warning signals.

Consider Betty, an executive I recently counseled through a painful situation. Betty married Kevin even though she knew he had cheated on his two previous wives. She believed that she was prettier, smarter, and better suited to him and that he would never jeopardize their relationship by repeating his old pattern. Six months later, she discovered that he was seeing an old girlfriend. By sweeping the problem under the rug instead of dealing with it, Betty had set herself up for disaster.

Here's another conversation in which, in dealing with an undesirable reality, Betty uses positive thinking to suppress unwanted information.

Ellen: I don't have enough money to cover my bills this month.

Betty: Just be positive and it will all work out fine.

Let's experience the difference when Optimal Thinkers embrace the same problem and seek the best solution:

Jack: I don't have enough money to cover my bills this month.
What is the best thing I can do?

Ralph: What is causing the problem? What are your options?
What do you think is the best solution?

The use of Optimal Thinking eliminates the suppression of negativity and lack of resolution that often occur with suboptimal

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positive thinking. *Optimal Thinkers acknowledge and respect negativity as an authentic expression of reality.* When we notice ourselves finding fault and worrying, we accept our negative viewpoints, seek to understand them, and immediately *ask the most constructive questions in order to find the best solution.* This is the simple path we travel to become fully realized beings. We acknowledge the rust, treat it, and then apply the best paint! We embrace all there is, and call on our best self to produce our greatest accomplishments.

Embrace the Negative, then Optimize!

This concept can be most effective in resolving emotional pain from the past. Unfortunately, many of us were emotionally wounded while growing up. Some of us were abused, betrayed, or abandoned by those who were most important to us. Until we acknowledge and deal with these wounds, we continue to be affected by them. With Optimal Thinking, we gain access to our best or highest self. When we are ready to deal with our childhood wounds, to acknowledge the pain and begin the healing process, this part of ourselves can serve as our greatest source of strength and nurturing. Our highest self discovers the best solution to all the problems we encounter. Here's an example.

Tony, a divorcé I coached, had never been in a healthy intimate relationship. He longed for a good relationship but spent most of his time alone. Tony's childhood had been miserable. His parents fought continuously, and his mother was verbally and physically abusive. He was terrified of her and dreamed of being left alone. When Tony left home, he tried to put his past behind him. He married a sweet woman but couldn't bring himself to be warm to her. After his divorce, he became involved in a number of superficial short-term relationships with unstable women.

During our consultations, he recalled the pain of his childhood and his bad feelings toward his mother. He realized that he had been protecting himself from getting close to women because he was afraid they would be like his mother. He was achieving his childhood (and childish) wish of being left alone. Once he understood what he was doing, he used Optimal Thinking to explore the best ways to deal with the abusive situations he feared. His feelings of terror and helplessness subsided as he continued to anticipate the most constructive actions. Tony eventually met a lovely woman who was sen-

sitive to his feelings, and for the first time in his life, he became involved in a healthy intimate relationship.

When Juan was twenty-six years old, he immigrated to America with his wife and daughter. Although he had enough money to purchase a home for his family, he thought the real estate market was overpriced. Juan decided to wait until the real estate market took a serious downturn. In the early 1990s, when the bottom had fallen out of the real estate market, Juan knew the time was right. He purchased his first home when his neighbors were most pessimistic and prices were rock bottom. Juan optimized a negative situation and within five years, his home had doubled in value.

Do you have a pen and notebook handy? If not, take a few moments to get them now. Think about a negative idea, feeling, or experience you have suppressed. Write it down. What are the best actions to resolve it? Jot them down. Now prioritize these actions and decide upon the best time frames to complete them. When you act in your best interest, you optimize your life.

2. Positive Thinking Is Often No More Than Wishful Thinking

In *The Power of Positive Thinking*, Norman Vincent Peale stated: "Expect the best at all times. Never think of the worst. Drop it out of your thought, relegate it. Let there be no thought in your mind that the worst will happen. You can overcome any obstacle. You can achieve the most tremendous things by faith power."

Many positive thinkers believe that their dreams will be realized by a magical, divine process that is triggered by the intensity of their hopes, wishes, and faith. They approach life with a false sense of security, and are ill prepared for negative consequences. Their positive thinking is often no more than wishful thinking and can be extremely dangerous.

Consider Betty, who told me about her last experience with wishful thinking. She actually quit her job and sold her house in Los Angeles, convinced that if she were steadfast in her faith, she would secure a job with a well-known company in San Diego. When Betty discovered that someone else got the job, she was devastated. Her wishful thinking put her out in the cold.

Do you experience feelings of disappointment because you entertain unrealistic expectations? Many optimistic thinkers expect the best from others, and pay a big price for it. Peter, a small-business owner, told me that kind of story. When he met Jodi at his local church, she told him that she had twenty years of sales experience in

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his industry and was responsible for tripling sales at her last job. Peter assumed that she was telling the truth and hired her on the spot. Every day, Jodi informed Peter about meetings with top executives that would soon result in large contracts, and Peter believed her. When Peter did not see any concrete results after three months, he concluded that he should have more faith in her. After six months of listening to Jodi's stories and paying her salary, Peter asked if he could see her list of contacts. In six months, she had made contact with only two potential clients. The rest of her time had been spent at Chamber of Commerce meetings, networking with people who had no decision-making authority or interest in his business. When Peter asked her why she had not sought out qualified prospects, Jodi answered, "I guess I haven't been asking the right questions. I am willing!" Peter's desire to see the best in Jodi had thwarted his good judgment.

During the flurry of excitement over the emerging dot-com phenomenon, many investors practiced wishful thinking. These optimistic thinkers convinced themselves that Internet stocks could be evaluated with unrealistic criteria. They assumed that stock prices could be bid up to any level investors were willing to pay, and would stay there. Their illusions were permanently shattered when their stocks lost 50 to 100 percent of their value. Here is a conversation I overheard where positive thinking had become wishful thinking.

Ellen: I am having sleepless nights. I'm worried about leaving my money in the stock market.

Betty: Trust the universe. Just stay positive and everything will fall into place.

"You have to accept whatever comes and the only important thing is that you meet it with the best you have to give."

—Eleanor Roosevelt

Let's experience the difference when two Optimal Thinkers seek the best solution to the same situation.

Jack: I am having sleepless nights. I'm worried about leaving my money in the stock market. What is the best thing I can do?

Ralph: What's the worst thing that could happen? What do you think is your best strategy if the worst occurred? How can you minimize your risk? What are the most constructive actions you can take under the current circumstances?

When Ralph realized that Jack was facing considerable danger, he asked questions to help his friend determine the best contingency plan.

*Optimal Thinking Is Optimal Realism—
It Is Not Optimism!*

In *Learned Optimism*, Dr. Martin Seligman states: “If the cost of failure is high, optimism is the wrong strategy. Sometimes we need to cut our losses and invest elsewhere rather than find reasons to hold on.” *Optimal Thinkers eliminate unnecessary disappointment, because they entertain realistic expectations and focus on optimizing situations within their control.* They realize that even with the best intent, some people are more capable than others. They exercise a realistic appraisal of others’ strengths, weaknesses, capabilities, and limitations. Optimal Thinkers ask the best questions to invite the best responses from others, but recognize that they are ultimately powerless over others’ decisions and actions. They simply explore their options and make the Optimal choice from realistic alternatives. Optimal Thinkers embrace reality and ask: *What’s the best thing I can do under the circumstances?* When the stakes are high, they employ an Optimal contingency plan against the worst-event scenario to minimize danger and negative consequences.

Here is an example: Most businesses understand that data loss caused by computer hardware failure is costly and can even be catastrophic. The probability of such failures is also considerable. As the cost of duplicating records is not prohibitive, it is common practice for companies to establish backup systems. The most prudent companies back up their records and house them in external facilities in case of fire, flood, or earthquake. In such instances, where employees are unable to gain access to the company’s premises, damages are significantly reduced. *When evaluating risk, we must weigh the probability and cost of failure (including the ability to cope with the consequences) against the cost and benefits of prevention.*

Immediately following the devastating attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, where thousands of innocent lives were lost, Deutsche Bank was able to safely evacuate approximately five thousand people from its four downtown Manhattan locations. These employees were relocated to other Deutsche Bank facilities. The bank successfully transferred its systems and data to backup facilities according to existing contingency plans. All critical

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applications were up and running. When the American equity markets reopened, the bank settled all equity trades successfully and was an active market participant. Deutsche Bank's risk management systems functioned as designed and enabled the company to successfully continue operating.

It isn't always possible to protect against detrimental outcomes. We take calculated risks throughout our lives. Recently I met with two representatives who were interested in producing Optimal Thinking products. During our initial conversation, the first executive said: "It's going to be a great day today. Did you know that Mercury is no longer in retrograde?" I wondered how much of his attention was invested in forces and events outside of his control. The other executive immediately asked: "What is the difference between optimism and Optimal Thinking?" I responded with, "I like your question. What you're really asking is what's the difference between hoping for the best, and asking: "What's the best thing I can do under the circumstances?" She smiled, and we were off to the right start!

Take some time now to consider the role of wishful thinking in your life. In your notebook, write down your greatest wish. Are you hoping that your wish will manifest miraculously or effortlessly? How realistic is this? Are you willing to use Optimal Thinking to give yourself the best chance of making your wish come true? Underneath your wish, write down: *What's the best thing I can do under the circumstances?* Listen carefully to the response and decide upon the best time to take your first Optimal action step. Put your best foot forward!

3. There Are Varying Shades of Positive Thinking

Communication between positive thinkers on different levels is often problematic. Conversation between them does not provide the best outcome because they are not on the same wavelength. For example, the mediocre positive thinker acts as a "wet blanket" to the extraordinarily positive thinker, who is the "energizer." The different levels of positive thinking are not harmonious. Here is a typical conversation:

Extraordinary Ed: Your home is in a fantastic location. You're close to the shops and your view is sensational.

Mediocre Mary: Yes, it is quite good.

Extraordinary Ed: You should be very happy with it. Your home is a great investment.

Mediocre Mary: I suppose it's okay.

Unfortunately, Mary and Ed often experience the disparity and frustration that prevail among the various levels of positive thinkers. In our world of infinite diversity, some people want to be good and others want to be great. Here's a scenario involving a married couple.

John, a mediocre positive thinker, makes a good living and is quite happy with the status quo. He has no desire to achieve extraordinary results. Susan is an extraordinarily positive thinker. She envisages herself as a multimillionaire with highly successful businesses throughout the world. John believes that Susan is a wishful thinker. Susan perceives John as mediocre and limiting. They are in continual conflict because their different levels of positive thinking are not in harmony.

No doubt you have experienced different levels of positive thinking. Often family members exhibit a mixture of thinking—most are suboptimal and on different wavelengths. Let's listen in on a conversation at AnyFamily:

Mediocre Mary: We need to plan our next vacation. John is a good travel agent and could give us a good price.

Extraordinary Ed: John is good, but I think Steven would do an outstanding job. He's terrific at finding unusual deals at great prices.

Mediocre Max: I hear what you say, but I think John will do a pretty good job. He's a regular guy who finds good deals for regular folks like us.

Now imagine the same problem being discussed at OptiFamily. The family members have all been exposed to Optimal Thinking and do their best to use it consistently. Optimal Thinking provides the thinking that empowers the family members to focus on the most desirable outcomes—and to contribute their best. Here is the difference:

Ralph: We need to plan our next vacation. Who's the best travel agent around?

Cheryl: Jim, Peter, and Jack would all be great, but Jack is the most appropriate person. He has the right contacts, the best track record, and the best deals at the best price.

Brian: You're right. He's also the most reliable. What's the best way to approach him about it?

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Optimal Thinking Is the Common Form of Thinking That Empowers Us to Be Our Best and Communicate at Our Peak.

Now let's listen to another conversation between two Optimal Thinkers during a recent *Optimal Thinking for Communicators* seminar. Brian and Lynn are on the same wavelength. Their communication demonstrates their ability to create and experience their Optimal relationship.

Brian: What is your vision of the Optimal relationship?

Lynn: An honest relationship where we care about each other's feelings as much as our own. We support each other to be the best we can be. When conflict arises, we face it and work out the best solution for both of us. What do you think?

Brian: I agree with you. I also think that discussing our plans on a daily basis is in our best interest. How do you feel about allocating time to do our favorite activities together?

Lynn: That makes sense. Can we keep Sundays open for tennis?

Brian: That sounds perfect. Are you ready for a game of tennis followed by a candlelight dinner?

Lynn: Definitely. What can I do to make sure it is most enjoyable for both of us?

Are you ready to let your best self take charge in your dealings with others? In your notebook make a list of all the people who are important to you, and write down the level of thinking you believe they are most comfortable with. Now jot down one Optimal question or statement you would like to use when you next speak with each person. Here is a sample listing to help you formulate your own:

Name	Dominant Thinking Level	Optimal Question or Statement
Elana	mediocre positive	You deserve the best in life!
Jimmy	extraordinarily positive	How can you optimize your schedule?
Craig	negative	What's the best thing you can do about it?

Name	Dominant Thinking Level	Optimal Question or Statement
Ralph	Optimal	Who's the right person to speak to about this issue?
Susan	extraordinarily positive	How can you make the most of your relationship?
Lionel	mediocre positive	What's most important to you?
Brian	Optimal	What's the best way to achieve your objective?
Mary	mediocre positive	What's in your best interest?
Cheryl	Optimal	I want to support you in being your best.

4. Suboptimal Thinking Is Not the Mental Basis of Peak Performance

You may ask: What is peak performance? Many professionals claim that if we think positively; display courage, persistence, and self-reliance; and use their suggested techniques for setting goals, managing time, and relating to others, then we will achieve peak performance. Such qualities and techniques are certainly constructive ingredients for success, but what is *essential* for peak performance is peak or Optimal Thinking. *We cannot function at our peak when we think in suboptimal terms.* Whenever we think suboptimally, it costs us time, energy, joy, and money. Our performance is always compromised if we think in only mediocre or even extraordinary terms.

Many people pay a heavy price for their suboptimal thinking. Mary, the homeowner and mediocre positive thinker, was such a person. When she needed a building contractor to remodel her home, she chose Michael because his price was reasonable and she thought he would do an adequate job. Mary didn't check his references because she was afraid of making waves. Michael agreed to start work on Mary's home immediately, took a deposit from her, but didn't do anything for three months. When Michael told Mary that he was working on a more important job, she got angry. She realized that he had a contract with a large building firm and had no intention of fulfilling his contract with her. Mary eventually took him to court. Sadly, Michael lied during the hearing and Mary lost the case. Mary had wasted time and money because she did not ask the best questions or take the most productive actions to ensure that her needs were met.

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Many of us have been told that if we want to experience peak performance, we must copy the thinking and actions of highly successful people. The following scenario illustrates why this philosophy is sometimes ineffective. Rowland, an Emmy Award-winning writer, had made a very comfortable living for the past twenty years, even though he didn't put his best efforts into his work. He actually hated writing and wanted to be a producer. When Pamela, an aspiring writer, met him at an industry function, she invited him to have lunch with her and asked him: "What do you think makes you so successful? What makes you different from the rest?" Rowland responded, "I don't have any pretensions as to what I do. It's not all that important. I write for a living. I don't write because I like it. I am successful at what I do because I don't get emotionally involved." Pamela knew she needed to be passionate about a project in order to give it her best shot. Duplicating Rowland's success formula could not motivate her to function at her peak!

Let's listen to a suboptimal positive thinking mother's complacency about her ten-year-old daughter's mediocre academic performance: "My daughter's grades are pretty good. She's quite motivated to succeed."

Now let's tune in to an Optimal Thinking mother's thoughts on how to encourage her daughter to do her best: "My daughter's grades are pretty good. Now how can I encourage her to put her best foot forward? What are her strengths? How can I inspire her to make the most of them? What are her weaknesses? How can I help her to minimize them? How can I guide her to achieve the best possible results?"

When my client Lynn joined a large sales organization, she discovered that some of the top achievers were using a sales script to deliver their sales presentations. Lynn was uneasy with the hard-sell tactics in the script. Nevertheless, she used it during numerous sales calls, but without success. Lynn was determined to make the most of her sales career. She studied the strengths and weaknesses of her product range, and gained the knowledge she required to accurately resolve her customers' concerns. She then modified her sales presentation to focus on their best interests. In her own unique way, she continually put her best foot forward. After three months, Lynn not only achieved the success she desired, but also became the company's top salesperson—without any hard-sell tactics!

Optimal Thinking Is the Mental Basis of Peak Performance.

We can employ the most productive action at any given moment, and function at our peak when we think in peak or Optimal terms! Optimal Thinking truly empowers our best self to take charge so that we experience peak performance—a blinding flash of the obvious! Here again is the quantum leap:

Suboptimal positive thinkers achieve good and great results. Optimal Thinkers achieve the best and greatest results. Suboptimal positive thinkers are interested in being productive. Optimal Thinkers make sure they are most productive. Suboptimal positive thinkers take a smart approach to achieve an important goal. Optimal Thinkers take the smartest approach to achieve their most important goal. Suboptimal positive thinkers manage their resources and improve their performance. Optimal Thinkers maximize their resources and their performance.

The following conversations provide an opportunity for you to make an instant Optimal choice. If your spouse had a similar problem, which friend would you consult? Let's listen to a conversation with Bill and his friend:

Bill: My wife has been cranky ever since her father died.

Suboptimal Friend: You'll have to put up with it if you want to stay married.

Now let's listen to some Optimal Thinkers discuss the same problem:

Ralph: My wife has been cranky ever since her father died. What's my best strategy for dealing with this?

Optimal Friend: That's the right question! What is the most productive attitude you can adopt during her time of grief? What are the best actions you can take to support her through this? How can you take the best possible care of yourself emotionally at the same time?

There are infinite ways an Optimal Thinker can experience peak performance and inspire it in others. Consider Sam, a single father and business consultant, who had been in the habit of promising his clients the world, taking shortcuts, and doing just enough to get by. For over fifteen years he went from job to job, covering up his mistakes whenever he could. After discovering Optimal Thinking, he wrote to me on two occasions.

On the first occasion, Sam told me about an incident with his ten-year-old son. When presented with mediocre homework, instead

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of accepting it as he had always done, Sam asked, “Is this the best you can do?” His son quickly admitted that he had better options. Sam then inspired his son’s peak performance when he said, “Give this project your best shot and then show it to me tomorrow.”

On the second occasion, Sam explained how Optimal Thinking empowered him to make the most of a shaky business situation. Prior to attending a meeting with his clients, he was painfully aware of how he had let them down and of everything that had gone wrong. He was afraid of facing them with the truth. This is when he decided to employ Optimal Thinking. He accepted his fear, and asked: “What’s in my best interest here? What’s in the best interest of the project?” He then proceeded to sort through his options. Armed with the most profitable solutions to the best and worst scenarios, he was able to go to the meeting with purpose, contribute his best, and gain maximum benefit from the meeting. His clients immediately hired him to do additional work.

Are you willing to give life your best shot? Write down one behavior that reflects suboptimal thinking and performance you are ready to change. For example, you might notice that your exercise regimen is suboptimal, or that you are not making the best use of your time when dealing with a friend or acquaintance. Optimize your thinking by asking: *What’s the best thing I can do about this?* Write down your answer. Now decide upon the time frame that will work best for you to optimize your performance. You are now on the Optimal path. Doing your best is the best you can do!

5. If We Don’t Maximize a Situation, We Don’t Complete It

Many positive thinkers constantly seek to improve their situation. They want better relationships, more satisfying work, and higher living standards. If the current solution is better than a previous solution, it’s good enough. Such thinkers rarely experience complete satisfaction because the unexplored alternatives continue to haunt them. They are often regretful because they focus on what *could* have happened, *should* have happened, and *would* have happened, if only—. Here is an example:

For years Jenny, a pretty television producer, had a busy social life. During her twenties and thirties, she dated lots of men who wanted to have children, but she invariably found fault with them. She was always looking for someone better. When she was in her late thirties, she met a good man and married him. Jenny assumed her husband wanted children but soon learned that this was not the

case. At forty, although Jenny was happier than when she was single, she was plagued with regret. She asked: “Why didn’t I make the most of my situation when I was in my thirties? Why didn’t I ask the right questions before I married? Why didn’t I marry a man who wanted children? Why was I so frivolous when I had men in my life who wanted children?”

Do you constantly strive to better your life but rarely feel satisfied? These days many people are self-improvement junkies. They read the latest books, listen to cassette tapes, and attend copious seminars on personal and professional development. They hunger for any piece of information that will improve their lives. They savor what they find, and digest their valuable insights. Many wisdom seekers are surprised when their appetites return; some are discouraged or even desperate. Something is missing and incomplete. They never seem to have enough.

Whenever you think suboptimally and seek to improve—rather than *maximize*—your current situation, the quality of your life is compromised. Consider Harry, a seventy-two-year-old extraordinarily positive thinker who attended a series of Optimal Thinking seminars. At the end of the first day, he shared with the participants that over the past thirty years he had purchased hundreds of books and attended countless self-help seminars. He had gained a lot from them but always felt that there was something missing. He was dissatisfied and looking for more.

Optimal Thinking provided Harry with the solution to his problem. Harry learned how to choose the best in every circumstance. He became peaceful and got into the habit of making the most of his life. His daughter recently shared with me that he had stopped telling her how things “should” be done. He simply asked, “Is this the best we can do?” At seventy-two years of age, Harry was a new man. He felt whole and complete.

Choose the Best, Then Put It to Rest.

Optimal Thinkers do more than improve attitudes, skills, relationships, and lifestyles. We maximize them. *We accept what we can’t control* (like the weather, interest rates, and others’ choices) *and maximize what we can control*. We embrace the present moment, trust our intuition, investigate the alternatives for solving our challenges, weigh their advantages and disadvantages, and determine the best solution within the given time constraints. We choose the best

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and then put it to rest. Having surrendered our best contribution, we can peacefully move on to the next supremely important issue. Let's look at how this simple concept enabled Sam to buy the right home.

Sam had been looking for a new home for six months. The market was tight and nothing remotely close to what he wanted had become available. His realtor had just located two homes in Sam's price range. The first was an improvement on his current home but it didn't have everything he wanted. The second home had everything on his checklist but was much more expensive than the first one. Sam told me how he used Optimal Thinking to purchase the right home. He simply posed one question: "Which is the best home in my price range?" The answer was obvious. He purchased the second home and laid the issue to rest.

Ten years ago, I conducted a series of *Optimal Thinking* seminars at a large bank. The bank had been downsizing, and most of the employees were afraid of losing their jobs. The training director was an Optimal Thinker. He knew that many of the participants would be out of work shortly and he wanted them to learn to apply Optimal Thinking in the toughest of circumstances. "What's the best thing I can do under the circumstances?" was displayed on a chalkboard throughout the seminar. The participants learned how to apply Optimal Thinking to their own specific circumstances. At the end of the seminar, those expecting to be laid off said, "We can relax now. We have the tools to make the most of our lives!" When I asked them how they felt, they answered, "On top of the world!"

Last year, I was invited to do another *Optimal Thinking* seminar at the same bank. I was on top of the world when I saw a large plaque in the entrance hall. It read: "What's the best thing I can do under the circumstances?"

It's your turn now. *Optimal Thinking is easily learned, instantly applied, and does not require a leap of faith!* So, what's the best thing you can do under the circumstances?

Optimal Questions

1. When am I most likely to think Optimally?
2. Am I embracing suboptimal thinking and behavior and optimizing it?
3. What is the best thing I can do under the circumstances?

4. Am I accepting what is out of my control and optimizing what is within my control?
5. Am I choosing the best and then putting my issues to rest?

Optimal Action Steps

1. As soon as you notice yourself thinking negatively, embrace this vulnerable part of yourself without judgment. Then ask: "What's causing this? What is the best thing I can do about it? What's the best solution?"
2. Notice when someone you know is thinking negatively. Instead of avoiding that person, determine if he or she is open to input. You might say: "I'm sorry this is a problem for you. Can I help you resolve it? What do you think is the best thing you can do about it? What are your options? What's the best solution?" If the person is too angry to be reasonable or is intent on maintaining a negative perspective, you could say: "I understand you are upset at the moment. When you are open to finding the best solution to this issue, I will be happy to give you my most constructive input."
3. Share a meal with a family member or friend. Consciously choose to use Optimal Thinking, and optimize, optimize, optimize!