

THE POWER OF
REAL
OPTIMISM

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REAL OPTIMISM

**A Practical, Science-Based Guide to
Staying Resilient, Curious, and Open
Even When Life Is Hard**

**DR. DEEPIKA
CHOPRA**

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*For my parents—
who taught me that real optimism
doesn't deny the dark,
but helps us see within it.
But mostly for my Jag, Dio, and Jia:
this is truly for you,
and the world I know you'll help create—
one shaped by your courage, your kindness,
and your wonder.
Mama is just so damn proud of you.*

There is a light that never goes out.

—The Smiths

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Prologue

*In light of everything, cracked open, not unscathed,
but still here and carrying the flicker*

In the summer of 2023—at the same time I was writing the proposal for this book—my two-year-old son, Dio, was diagnosed with an extremely rare illness. I will spare you the details (they are not necessary, I want to respect his privacy, and frankly, I can still barely talk about them without getting upset), but let’s just say it was an extremely dark time in my and my family’s life.

The worst part by far was the uncertainty; the condition was so rare—literally only two children in a million are diagnosed with it each year—that the doctors weren’t able to give my husband and me any definitive answers about our son’s prognosis or the chance of recurrence after treatment. Dio had surgery, and the doctors recommended an intense course of treatment for a year. But given how little they knew about the disease, they still couldn’t promise the treatment would be effective. We had to make a terrible choice based on unreliable information. My husband and I hated the prospect of putting our sweet boy through anything this severe, but doing nothing seemed like a worse option. I could not let my child stay at risk.

We agreed to move ahead with the doctor’s recommendations, and within a few days Dio was undergoing a second surgery, this time to implant a port in his chest where he would receive his treatments over the next year. *How is this happening?* I kept thinking. Just a few days earlier my son had been a happy toddler, wrestling with his older brother and playing with his favorite toy trucks in our living room. Now he was unconscious on an operating table, and we were all facing an uncertain future. Sitting outside the operating room, my husband and I watched,

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helpless, as we waited for the “surgery in progress” light to turn off. *With every agonizing minute, my thoughts raced. Why is it taking so long? Is something wrong? How has it been only thirty minutes? Haven't I been here for hours?* I kept telling myself not to cry, but the tears came anyway, silently and uncontrollably creating a pool behind my glasses. I was holding on to Dio's lovey so tightly against my cheek that it ended up becoming soaking wet from my tears. Just as he usually used it every night for comfort, I was now using it to do the same.

The surgery went well, but the worst was yet to come. For the next year, in addition to watching Dio endure his treatments at the hospital, my husband and I had to give him a daily dose of steroids. Pediatric steroids are usually administered orally, and the standard version most hospitals prescribe have a flavor and consistency that can only charitably be described as chalklike. Almost every child on an immune-suppressing treatment requires steroids, and yet, even well into the twenty-first century, scientists haven't bothered to come up with a formula that is even a little bit palatable? C'mon, people, can we get a new formula going already?!

Dio was far too small to swallow pills, so the pharmacist recommended crushing the medicine and mixing it with his food. “Just don't mix it with something he likes,” they told us. “Because he'll never want to eat it again.” It didn't matter what we tried—yogurt, ice cream, peanut butter, even that sugary flavored syrup you use for snow cones—Dio was not fooled. He wouldn't eat any of it. The first time we tried nearly broke me. Alex, my husband, had to physically restrain him in his high chair as I held his mouth open to force the spoonful of medicine-laced mush in. Of course he immediately spat it out—strawberry yogurt mixed with his potentially lifesaving medicine splattering all of our faces, his tray, our clothes. I couldn't blame him. I had tried a little bit of the mixture out of a sense of solidarity, just to try and understand what he was going through. I gagged to the point where I almost vomited. How on earth was this going to work? How was I going to do this every day? It seemed impossible—and awful. My mind flashed to accounts I'd read of prison guards force-feeding inmates or political protesters. It is an inherently

violent and violating act—and here I was being forced to do it to my beloved son. His own mother and father—potentially traumatizing him in order to keep him safe. I wanted someone to make it make sense. Well, it didn't. It still doesn't.

As he continued to scream and cry, something inside me shattered. I left Dio with Alex and retreated to my office to hide. I felt like a frightened child as I literally crawled under my desk to get as far away from everything as possible. I let myself fall to pieces. "I can't do this," I wailed into the floor. "I can't do this. Why do I have to do this?"

The next few months were an absolute blur. It wasn't lost on me that, through what was perhaps the most pessimistic period of my life, I was writing a book about optimism tools and positioning myself as an expert on mental health and positive thinking (which I am!). As I write this now, I'm about a year out from the initial diagnosis and can say that, at the very least, the experience was a lesson in humility. Because even I, the Optimism Doctor, didn't take my own advice . . . well, not at first.

Every moment of that year was filled with some urgent task: rushing back and forth to the hospital, researching therapies and statistics, writing this book, and of course, taking care of Dio, my older son, Jag, and my unborn daughter. Oh, right, did I mention we were about to welcome a third child during this entire ordeal? Well, we were, and I could barely savor the excitement and joy I felt at the prospect of having my first baby girl because I *had* to focus on everything else that was going on instead. Not only that, but I couldn't help but think that, as the universe was about to bring us a new, by all accounts perfectly healthy baby, it might be about to take my baby boy away from me. I was in the darkest place I had ever been mentally or emotionally, and I spent a lot of time there, deep within those thoughts.

All my friends told me I was brave and strong and seemed to have it all together. But I didn't feel like I had it all together. I didn't feel brave. I felt like I had no other choice. If you're sitting there thinking you don't know how you would get through something like this, trust me, you would. You would be amazed at what you would soldier through if you had to.

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When I wasn't in full-on soldier mode, I resorted to a bunch of old coping techniques—the things I did before I understood how the brain works and just wanted to gain a sense of control over my life. I sought out old spiritual teachers—people I had met in high school—to help guide me through my grief. During the few weeks we waited on pathology reports, I journaled and recited affirmations, hoping I could will them into reality: *Dio is healthy. The tests will come back negative. Dio is healthy. My family is healthy.* I visited psychics, believing that if I knew what the future held, I could somehow intervene. I banished—or at least tried to banish—every negative scenario from my mind. I had to stay positive—for myself, for Dio, for my family, for my sanity. The doctors had told us the mass they had removed was likely one of three things: it could be benign; it could be a rare disease that was potentially treatable but for which there wasn't a whole lot of information or data suggesting outcome measures; or it could be a third disease, one that was equally rare and pretty much immediately fatal. I would not let myself believe anything but the best-case scenario. I told myself, time and time again, that it had to be benign.

Of course, dark thoughts still crept in. *What if this is the start of goodbye? What if this is the first of many lasts?* All the small, mundane, routine moments became so big and automatically sent tears streaming down my face: our nightly ritual of reading a page in our big book of animals; rocking on our favorite chair; the full-belly laughs when we told our inside jokes; the after-dinner dance parties. Despite my desperate attempt to stay positive, I felt such despair during that time that it changed me forever. I wouldn't wish three minutes of these thoughts on any parent, let alone three weeks.

Even though I had tried all these things—in vain—before, the need to regain some sense of control over the situation led me down a rabbit hole of magical thinking, denial, and—I'll admit it—delusion. I preferred the illusion of control to the reality of uncertainty. I was searching for answers where none existed.

One evening as I was rocking Dio to sleep in the darkness of his bedroom (a nightly ritual we had carried out since he was a baby), he looked

up at me with his big brown eyes and said, “Mama, you are doing a good job.” This was my sweet, tender, sensitive little boy, sensing my sadness at his pain and taking care of me the way I was taking care of him. It crushed me. I looked down at him, tears welling up in my eyes, and said, “Dio, *you* are doing such a good job.” And then he said, “We are doing it together, Mama.”

The pathology reports finally came back, and while the mass wasn’t benign like I’d hoped, it also wasn’t the immediately fatal scenario, either. While the treatment wasn’t guaranteed to work forever, there was at least a treatment. And treatment meant hope. I asked the doctors if they knew what might have caused this, but they couldn’t give me an answer; the disease was so poorly understood that they had no scientific explanation. “As far as we know,” they told me, “it’s just bad luck.” I couldn’t accept that, though. The scientist in me believed there had to be a reason.

As the months went on, we settled into more of a routine. I dreaded Tuesdays, when Dio had treatment, but I made it through by reminding myself that this course had an end date. On the day of his first treatment, I started a countdown, and each Tuesday, after we left the hospital, was one Tuesday closer to this particular part of the ordeal finally being over.

Unfortunately, I had no idea if this would actually *ever* be over. Even as Dio neared the end of his treatment, whatever optimism I felt about his prognosis gave rise to new worries. As of this writing, Dio is still a very small child, and his disease remains a complete mystery to the smartest scientists and doctors alive. “It could still come back,” I told myself. “This might not be over. What if the next time is even more serious? What if doctors never find a cure? Will he need to worry about this for the rest of his life?” At a time I had assumed would be full of relief and optimism about the future, I was filled with a new sense of dread and fear.

In some ways, this period was even more emotionally difficult for me than the immediate aftermath of Dio’s diagnosis. At least then there was something I could do to potentially fix the situation. There were decisions to be made, appointments to be scheduled, prescriptions to fill and administer, healthy meals to prepare, doctor’s notes to obtain. I hated the

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treatment days, but at least I could tell myself we were doing something actionable. Now the only thing I could do was wait. All of a sudden, I faced the prospect of a literal lifetime of uncertainty and a fate I could do nothing to control.

I didn't want to project my anxiety onto my kids (the youngest of whom, Jia, joined our family a few months into Dio's treatment). I especially didn't want to upset Dio, who would have enough to worry about without managing the anxiety of his mother. I spent a lot of time crying in my car. Every trip to the market, every run to my PO box, every drive home from dinner with friends was a chance to let all my emotions out. I sobbed until my eyes were red and my nose started running. I screamed. I wailed. I heaved. I pounded my fists on the steering wheel and searched every corner of my psyche for a reason why this was happening and a way to heal the pain. I asked "Why me? Why our family? Why my baby?" Until I had to remind myself: "Why not me?" My life has been blessed in many ways, but I am not special. Bad luck can strike anyone.

As I have so often discovered in life, relief came in the most unexpected form. One night, just before Dio went in for his final treatment, I decided to unwind by watching the movie *A Family Affair* on Netflix. (I know, I know. You probably were not expecting me to reference this random movie at this point in my story, but I promise there's a point, so just go with it!) In the movie, Zac Efron plays Chris, the boss of Nicole Kidman's daughter, and he and Kidman's character, Brooke, start dating, even though he is much younger than she is. Is it a good movie? No. I can't really recommend it, but one scene from late in the movie has stuck with me. In the scene, Brooke is fretting over her relationship with Chris to her late husband's mother, played by the indomitable Kathy Bates, because she's worried the relationship is doomed to fail. As she's stressing, Bates's character stops her and says, "The end is none of your business." (I actually remember the line as "Kid, the future is none of your fucking business," but Google is telling me I added that color on my own.)

As I'm writing this, it's been several months since I watched this film (which a top critic on Rotten Tomatoes literally described as "fine"), and I cannot stress enough how much this scene resonated with me. The end

is none of our business. We cannot predict the future, so why do we spend so much time trying? Why, as the aphorism goes, should we borrow trouble from tomorrow when all we can really worry about is right now? This otherwise forgettable line in a perfectly okay movie helped me realize I didn't need to control what happened in the future—I couldn't. It didn't matter if the universe had a plan for me or if everything in life was chalked up to bad luck; there were certain things I could control and certain things I couldn't. All I could do was focus on what I could control and be open and curious about the rest of it. All the research I had done and the expertise I had could take me only so far; I had to live life in order to really learn from it. I had already spent this long in darkness, and my family and I have gotten through this horrible, unimaginable period together. So why should I spend the time I have now—the time where my son is not in treatment, is able to start school, and can travel again (even though we still have to be very careful when we do)—paralyzed with worry and anxiety? Why would I choose darkness when there is so much light?

I want to use this time to live, to celebrate. During the year Dio was in treatment, I had forgone a lot of big celebrations because I didn't feel like celebrating anything. I didn't celebrate my fortieth birthday. I didn't throw a party for the birth of our baby girl. I didn't even celebrate selling this book to a major publishing house. But now, right now, I want to celebrate everything. For example, I just booked a trip for the five of us to go to Napa, which is where we went when Dio was first diagnosed and we were waiting for the pathology report. Even though the place holds such shitty memories from the last time we were there, I want to return to it so we can rewrite the memory during this new phase of our life. I want to do it all again, as a family. I want to recapture the magic we briefly lost. I don't want to be afraid anymore.

I decided to share this story at the beginning of the book for a few reasons. First, it seemed dishonest not to. How could I write about optimism without acknowledging how difficult it can be for even an optimism expert to practice it when life gets stressful? How could I offer advice without admitting that sometimes, I'm the last to take it? I also shared it

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in the hopes that any readers who are going through something particularly difficult will draw some strength and hope from it. Bad things can happen to anyone, and while your situation is likely not the same as mine, it's important to know that you are not alone. We all struggle at times—no matter how confident or put together or strong we may appear. I hope you can take some solace in that.

Of course I also wanted to share my story, in part, to help me process what the hell had just happened to me and my family. Writing, as you'll see throughout this book, is one of the most powerful ways to process emotions and cultivate optimism. Connecting with others is another powerful tool. Sometimes simply expressing an emotion or sharing the most painful parts of ourselves alleviates some of the burden we feel and helps us gain a sense of perspective.

But most of all, I see this story as a clear example of what real optimism is and isn't. Optimism is not about believing that everything will turn out the way you want it; that everything will go according to plan, or that positive thinking about the future can stave off disaster. It's about accepting that life is hard—sometimes *really* hard—but it always has something to teach us. If we can stay open to those lessons, we will survive. What other choice do we have?

As I write this, I don't know what the future holds for Dio or for our family. Right now he is happy and healthy, but I am aware that that could change. Or something else could happen that rocks our world in a way we couldn't expect. I feel this anxiety a lot. In my free time or the quiet moments of the day, I can feel it sneaking up on me. But I try to remind myself that *the future is none of our business*. Because I don't need to know what will happen tomorrow to know that I will survive it. I will survive it because I have before. This is the essence of real optimism.

Introduction

*You can overcome a lot of things,
but you cannot overcome being human.*

In the fall of 2016, I got pregnant with my first son. When the doctor gave me and my husband the news, I was equal parts thrilled and terrified. I had always wanted to become a mother, and pregnancy seemed like such a wonderful adventure. At the same time, I had always harbored intense anxiety about carrying and delivering a baby. I'm a bit of a hypochondriac (okay, okay, definitely more than *a bit*), and as far back as I could remember, I dreaded the experience of childbirth. Still, I tried to push any panic-inducing thoughts out of my mind and focus on my impending status as a new mom. I tried to picture a positive, healthy pregnancy. I imagined caressing my ever-expanding belly, singing sweet lullabies to the life growing inside of me, nourishing my body and my baby with an all-organic diet and regular prenatal massages. Maybe I'd take up yoga—even though I haven't made it through a full yoga class in decades. Maybe I'd put on a flowy white dress, head to the nearest beach, and have someone shoot soft-focused photos of me and my bump at twilight like so many women on my Instagram feed! No matter how nervous I was, I strove to take pride and joy in the experience.

That is not what happened.

In my second trimester, I was diagnosed with hyperemesis gravidarum, an extremely serious, rare-but-not-rare-enough condition that causes some pregnant people to vomit, well, *a lot*. This is not morning sickness. This is morning, afternoon, evening, middle of the night, while you're driving, while you're sleeping, while you're talking to your mom on the phone or watching TV or doing anything that usually brings you joy, any time of the day or night sickness. I threw up over thirty times a

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day, every day, during the entire duration of my pregnancy. I threw up on every major roadway in Los Angeles. I threw up on the beautifully manicured sidewalks of Beverly Hills. Once I even threw up in the middle of a client's visualization session while asking her to imagine her ideal safe space. To this day, I cringe at the thought that I might have ruined whatever that place was for her.

I was so sick I had to stop seeing clients because I didn't have the strength to work—and, to be honest, because I felt like a fraud. I am known as “The Optimism Doctor,” but during those ten months, I lost every thread of optimism within me. I was so miserable that I couldn't stand for anyone—not even my husband—to touch me. This was a big deal because under normal circumstances, I crave physical human contact so much that my body starts to feel depleted if I go without it for too long. (Yes, my love language is physical touch.) Before I got pregnant, I'd maintained an extremely strict diet—no gluten, no dairy, no refined sugar, no nightshades—to manage an autoimmune disorder. After the nausea set in, the only thing I could stand to eat were Egg McMuffins. No, not some SoCal, sprouted-grain, organic, Erewhon version of an Egg McMuffin: the OG McDonald's, fully processed, registered trademark, Egg McMuffin.* The only thing that made me feel the tiniest bit better was scratching the peel of a fresh lemon or orange and sniffing it. I craved the milliseconds of relief this brought me so much that I carried a piece of citrus fruit around with me all day and pulled it out at regular intervals to smell it. (I ruined several leather purses this way.)

These days, it's easy to look back on this period of my life with a sense of humor, but at the time, all of this compounded to make me feel really, *really* bad. Most days I struggled to get out of bed. And when I did get out of bed, I was so exhausted and sick that even simple tasks, like drinking a glass of water, making a cup of tea, or showering, felt impossible. I tried everything to feel better, but nothing worked. I am a clinically trained

* Ironically, those Egg McMuffins are probably the only thing that kept me out of the hospital, because despite the constant vomiting and the fact that I needed daily IV drips to stay hydrated, I still managed to gain thirty-two pounds.

behavioral scientist with a doctorate in clinical health psychology. I had spent my days working with clients to help them manage all manner of mental health issues—from anxiety, stress, and low self-esteem to crippling disorders like OCD and clinical depression. I am also a student of holistic wellness practices and have tried basically every tip or trick recommended by a wellness expert or self-help book over the past two decades. (Some have worked, some have not, but as a professional who has had a deep and complex relationship with my own emotional and physical health, I feel it's my job to try anything at least once.) The point is, I, more than most people, have the tools and training necessary to pull myself out of a funk and optimize my mental health. And yet the second I got pregnant, none of the tools in my toolbox worked. I meditated. I recited affirmations in the mirror. (*I am healthy. I feel wonderful, joyful, and at ease.*) I journaled and wrote down things I was grateful for. I prayed, even though I don't believe in any particular god. I attempted to take walks in nature. Before bed each night, I imagined waking up with a calm stomach, hoping I could manifest this dream into a reality the next morning. I visualized myself in a room full of white roses, which signify protection and healing. In my pre-pregnancy life, most of these practices helped ease my mind and calm my nerves. During this period, not a single thing brought me a moment of relief, let alone joy.

Then one night, seven months into my pregnancy and counting down the minutes until my due date, I resolved to do something—*anything*—to try to boost my mood. Earlier that day I had (somehow) thrown my best friend a bridal shower and now found myself staring at a bag of large rose petals, which I had left over from a decoration. I knew from my work that engaging one's senses is usually a great way to calm your mind. (I am, at heart, a vibe girl—totally into setting the perfect mood for the moment.) So I ran myself a warm (but not too warm) bath, threw in a few petals, dimmed the lights, put on my favorite Mazzy Star album (because this is what happens when you mix a vibe girl with a nineties indie rock/grunge girl), and tried to will myself to get into the tub. I knew the moment my body touched the water I would probably throw up, so I just sat there, staring intently at the petals floating softly across the surface while

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trying to ignore my roiling insides and the jabs of my son's feet against my rib cage.

And then, like a rainbow cutting through the clouds after a storm, I had a thought. "This sucks right now, Deepika, but it will not last forever," I told myself. "You *can* get through this. You *will* get through this." For a brief, shining moment, I felt lighter. I felt at ease. I even felt a little bit joyful. In short, for the first time during my pregnancy, I felt optimistic.

The moment didn't last long. Roughly ten seconds later, any mental and physical relief I felt was replaced with the sudden need to vomit, and my thoughts once again turned to how awful I felt. I continued to feel awful every day until my son was born. I continued to feel bitter and sad over the fact that I didn't get to enjoy my pregnancy. And I continued to lack the energy to do anything that had once brought me pleasure or satisfaction. But something significant had changed. Whenever I started to despair, I brought myself back to that moment beside the bathtub. I reminded myself that I would feel good again. That one day the vomiting would stop and I would once again be able to enjoy all the things I usually did. That this truly awful experience would make me stronger—and perhaps already had. It was this slight but profound mental shift—not the bath, not the affirmations, not the journaling—that helped me endure the rest of my pregnancy.

I like sharing this story because it reveals so much about what we get wrong about mental health. In our positivity-obsessed culture, we have come to believe that the goal of mental health is to eliminate stress and conflict and to try to be happy all the time. "Good vibes only," "find your bliss," "always look on the bright side"—these may seem like harmless slogans on a T-shirt or Instagram post, but their prevalence points to a deep desire in our culture to feel as good as possible as often as possible. This is understandable. Who wouldn't prefer to feel happy, energetic, and at ease in the world, as opposed to depressed, angry, or anxious? But equating good vibes with psychological wellness is not just inaccurate; it sets us up for failure. This is what I experienced firsthand during my pregnancy: When we try to fight the things we have no control over or

bury our feelings under fake smiles and hollow affirmations, we fail—and often feel worse for the effort. The goal of mental health is not to be happy all the time. It's to learn how to face whatever comes our way with curiosity, compassion, and resilience. It is to elevate our emotional state in such a way as to allow us to live a life aligned with our deepest hopes, desires, and values. This is the promise of what I call *real optimism*.

What do I mean by real optimism? We tend to think of optimists as perpetually positive Pollyannas—always peering through their rose-colored lenses in search of silver linings and half-full glasses. To be optimistic, we believe, is to be generally unbothered by the actual state of things. But this is an oversimplification. Optimism is not about ignoring reality or being cheerful all the time. Real optimists are keenly aware that sometimes life sucks. The caveat is they see these setbacks and challenges as temporary, something they have the ability to learn from and overcome. Optimists do not quash negative emotions, but they also don't give themselves completely over to them. Instead they acknowledge that stress, anger, fear, and sadness are natural parts of the human experience and use those feelings to identify their needs and desires. Optimists know they can't control everything that happens to them in life, but they can control—or at least attempt to control—their response to it.

Why should we strive to become more optimistic? Because, simply put, optimism improves our mental and physical health and makes us more able to face whatever life has in store while staying committed to our goals and values. Science has shown that people with a greater sense of optimism experience more life satisfaction and improved mental health, marked by a decrease in depression and anxiety. Optimism increases personal resilience and improves one's ability to cope with stress and setbacks. Optimism also promotes and improves relationships (a key indicator of happiness), since optimistic people are considered to be more friendly, likable, and socially attractive. Optimism enhances one's physical health in many ways. One study found that individuals who scored high in optimism lived, on average, 11 to 15 percent longer than those who scored lower and were significantly more likely than pessimists to live to be eighty or older. Optimistic people have better cardiovascular

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health and bounce back from common respiratory illnesses much more quickly than those who are more pessimistic. Optimism has also been shown to promote creativity, innovation, productivity, and problem-solving, as well as to lead to better decision-making and increased self-esteem, confidence, and self-mastery. And because of all these associations, optimists are more likely to report longer, more satisfying relationships than pessimists.

I developed my approach to mental health and optimism after becoming disillusioned with so many of the popular approaches out there. To be clear, I am *not* the most optimistic person I know. In fact, I'm pretty sure I'm not even the most optimistic person in my immediate family. For the first few decades of my life, it never occurred to me to pursue psychology as a career because I assumed I wasn't cut out for it. Growing up, I was an extremely sensitive child. So sensitive that my parents had to shield me from sad movies or news stories because anything the least bit upsetting could put me out of commission. I could watch extremely violent crime movies like *Scarface* or *The Godfather* on repeat; those things didn't faze me. But anything about injustice or the inexplicable grief of human love and loss? Forget it. True story: When I was fourteen years old, I had to stay home from school for a week after I saw *Titanic* for the first time. I was so traumatized by Jack's death that I couldn't get out of bed. You read that right: The death of a fictional character and the end of a completely unrealistic (and extremely short-lived) romance laid me out *for a whole week*.

But then, a few years after I graduated from college and got my first job, a boss and mentor of mine suggested that a degree in psychology might allow me to channel my natural empathy and curiosity about people into an actual job. I decided I had nothing to lose. I got accepted to the clinical health psychology program of my dreams, earned my master's, and put in thousands of clinical hours before earning my doctorate and then completing a double postdoctoral fellowship at UCLA and Cedars-Sinai. Along every step of this very long and difficult process, I fell in love with the work more and more. I loved helping people overcome challenges, both circumstantial and psychological, so they could live the lives they dreamed of. I loved giving people the tools and self-knowledge they

needed to improve their mental health. I loved seeing the progress they made as they learned to replace the fears, anxieties, and negative thoughts holding them back with internal narratives that helped them achieve their goals and embrace the future optimistically.

At the same time, I also became disillusioned with many of the methods I was being taught. While traditional talk therapy worked well for helping patients identify and process trauma or unhelpful belief systems, the approach forced us to spend most of our time focused on their past. Neuroscience shows us that the brain is an anticipatory organ; it is always looking ahead, not behind. While we all benefit from developing self-awareness and understanding how past events have impacted our mental state, awareness alone can't help us change our behaviors. That requires a different set of tools.

I started to observe how many of my patients, in search of these tools, looked to popular self-help culture for answers. In some cases, the strategies they found worked well. I have clients who swear by their meditation, yoga, breath work, journaling, or other practices, and that is great! In fact, research shows that such practices can have a profound positive impact on your mental health when used in a way that complements your natural brain chemistry and stress response. Routines and practices that are authentic to the way your mind works are great additions to your mental toolbox.

Unfortunately, not all trendy self-help practices fit this bill. Practices such as reciting affirmations, creating vision boards, or manifesting to the universe don't always require you to take action or shift your thinking and therefore often fall short of the promises they make. If you don't *believe* you're beautiful, you won't convince yourself simply by staring in a mirror and saying it three times out loud. If you don't *believe* you're worthy of love, you won't find a healthy relationship just by verbalizing it. And if you don't back up your dreams with action, you will never reach your goals because, trust me, the universe has plenty of other stuff to worry about other than whether you're living, laughing, and loving as much as you should be. Shifting your thoughts is difficult, but it's a lot easier to do when you understand how to work with your brain instead of against it.

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As part of my work, I studied the brain and became totally obsessed with what I was learning. For example, did you know that the brain is terrible at distinguishing between fact and fiction? If you imagine something is happening, your brain responds as if it is *actually* happening. Once we know this, it's easy to see how our thoughts—even outlandish or incorrect ones—can affect the way we feel. The brain also seeks patterns in order to help it make better predictions and tries to confirm information it already knows so it can become even more efficient. This is great for detecting signs of danger, but it often leads the brain to spot threats where none exist.

All this knowledge allows us to understand why our thoughts and emotions can be so difficult to temper. The good news is, the brain is highly adaptive and malleable. It is always learning, which means we can teach it more of what we want. When we apply the right tactics for doing this, we can shift our thoughts gradually but dramatically, so they help instead of hinder us.

In 2013, I started my own practice and have continued to develop a unique approach to working with my clients that combines the most powerful aspects of traditional therapy—such as cognitive behavioral therapy—with science-based tools and holistic methods that help people redefine their expectations and increase resilience; identify and alter false narratives; and navigate difficult emotions and experiences with curiosity instead of fear. I also started finding ways to measure my clients' capacity for optimism in different aspects of their lives and then work toward increasing that capacity wherever necessary. Because the mainstream therapy community did not really have the right vocabulary for many of the methods I use, I stopped referring to what I do as therapy in the traditional sense and started to refer to it as self-worth work. One day after I had described my approach to a client, he told me, “So, basically, you're like my optimism doctor.” I had never put it that succinctly before, but I realized he was exactly right and have embraced the moniker ever since.

The more I studied my clients, the more I noticed that the way everyone experiences life depends not just on what families they're born into

or how their past has shaped them, but on how they choose to view the world and their place within it. The difference between an optimist and a pessimist cannot be explained by circumstance alone. Optimists do not live lives free from worry or stress. In fact, many of them have overcome enormous challenges that have shaped their characters and outlooks. The difference is that those who choose to look at life optimistically view these challenges as temporary and as opportunities for growth, rather than as catastrophes.

After reading this book, I hope you will have a deeper appreciation for not only *why* optimism is worth pursuing but *how* to do so—effectively and diligently. I hope it will help you let go of the need to be perfect and understand that mental health is not some ideal state of being; it is an ongoing lifelong process that requires self-compassion, softness, and acceptance. *You can overcome a lot of things, but you cannot overcome being human.* You are wired to experience the full range of human emotion—not just happiness—and life is definitely going to throw crap your way at times (maybe even a *lot* of the time). When you learn to face that crap optimistically, you learn how to move through life with greater ease and satisfaction, leaving you energy to focus on what truly brings your life meaning and joy.

In the pages that follow, I will share groundbreaking research into how the brain works and how that directly impacts the way we think, act, and feel in order to show how cultivating a real optimism practice can—gradually but significantly—improve your life. I will start by making the case for what *real* optimism is and why it matters. I will then explain how the brain processes information and how we can use its efficiency, neuroplasticity, and future-oriented nature to nurture a more positive outlook that will set us up for success in achieving our most important goals. I will explain how the cult of positivity skews the goal of mental health and how sitting within discomfort—not ignoring it—is the key to resiliency and growth. I will explain the origins of popular practices like affirmations, manifestation, and self-care and explain why, unless they're practiced in a way that honors the way our brains work, they can end up feeling ineffectual (and in some cases counterproductive). I'll explain why I think

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the concept of balance is bullshit and why it's better to focus on having a purpose and making empowered choices than to try to have it all. I'll explain why some aspects of traditional therapy—while helpful for becoming more self-aware and processing traumas—can often leave you feeling stuck; how even micro-moments of joy can drastically boost your mood; and why, if you want to create fulfilling long-term relationships, your argument style matters *way* more than how you show affection.

Throughout the book, I will draw on my more than fifteen years of experience working with clients and patients, providing workshops, studying the latest research, and developing strategies anyone can use to practice more optimism, combat anxiety, and achieve a healthier outlook on life. I will share stories from my life as well as the lives of my clients to show how optimism works in the real world and how it can help you no matter what you're struggling with. I will offer practical step-by-step strategies, practices, and techniques that work *with* our brain's natural programming instead of against it. And I will refer to interviews I have conducted with dozens of experts—including performance coaches, professional athletes, psychotherapists, and neuroscientists—to offer additional perspectives on how optimism can be applied in all facets of life.

While I don't believe this book is a substitute for quality professional care, I do believe that real optimism is one of the most powerful tools we have to increase joy, resilience, and hope in our lives. I believe that the more optimism exists in the world, the more loving, compassionate, and collaborative our world could be. I believe that optimism is the antidote to the fear and anxiety so many of us feel on a daily basis and that *only* by embracing an optimistic outlook can we ever hope to solve the most pressing challenges we face—on both a personal and global level. It may sound ridiculous, but I truly believe that optimism can change the world, but it won't happen all at once. Optimism is literally contagious; the more each one of us cultivates it within ourselves, the more it will radiate toward others. Call me an optimist but I believe that with the tools in this book, you can make your life and the lives of those around you a little bit brighter—and that is something even the most cynical person can agree is worthwhile. Let's get started.

“Stay Positive!”

What We Get Wrong About Optimism and Why It Matters

Optimism doesn't erase struggle; it survives it.

Look, you seem cool and all, but I gotta be honest. I don't know why I'm here. Everyone keeps telling me I should just try and stay positive or whatever, but what's the point? It's not like it's going to change anything.”

Nick was in his early twenties and had spent the last few months undergoing treatment for cancer. I was a twenty-five-year-old doctoral student working my first internship in UCLA's psycho-oncology department. My job was to provide therapeutic support to cancer patients and their loved ones to help them cope with their diagnoses and treatments. Nick was my first patient—and one of the toughest cases I've had in my career to date.

He was a stereotypical tough guy. From the moment we met, he exuded machismo and made it clear that he thought therapy was a waste of time. He'd been raised to believe that emotional vulnerability was a sign of weakness and feelings were best kept to oneself. As a result he was, let's just say, *struggling* to come to terms with his circumstances. As part of his treatment, he had undergone surgery, which had gotten rid of the cancer but struck a blow to his confidence and sense of virility. When I started seeing him, he had just completed his prescribed course of treatment but had to return to the hospital every few months in order to check if the cancer had returned. A pattern quickly emerged. In the

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weeks leading up to each appointment, Nick would begin to act out his stress in increasingly dangerous ways. At one of our earliest sessions, he showed up with bloodied knuckles left over from a fight he'd gotten into at a party the night before. A few weeks later, he wrecked his car after speeding through the winding streets of the Hollywood Hills and careening off an embankment. He somehow walked away from the scene without any serious injuries, but it was clear to me that he was risking his life on purpose, coping with his fear by trying to cheat death rather than talk about it.

Therapy is both art and science. While there are specific methods and tools you can use based on tested principles, every patient is different, and not everyone will respond to the same types of treatment. In order to truly connect with each patient, you need to get creative. And that starts by getting to know the person and meeting them where they are at. I knew right away that if I was going to help Nick, the first thing I needed to do was gain his trust. Everyone around him—his family, his friends, his fellow cancer patients, and even some of his doctors—kept telling him to keep his chin up, to not dwell on his diagnosis, to try to be optimistic. And he wasn't buying it.

It became clear that I wasn't going to have much success by trying to coax Nick to talk about his feelings or to list off all the ways a more positive outlook could benefit him. He had had a good life, a positive attitude, and a healthy social life; and he felt like cancer had stolen that from him. I needed to help him see that he still had a lot of life to live.

"Do you have any games coming up?" I asked Nick during one session shortly after his accident.

I knew Nick was an avid hockey player. He'd played since he was a kid and was extremely competitive. During the more intense parts of his treatment, he hadn't been well enough to play, but as soon as his health started improving, he rejoined his league and played every Sunday at a rink near his home. A few people had suggested that maybe he should take it easy while his body fully healed, but he wouldn't give it up. I'd noticed that, at many of our sessions, the only time he seemed to feel joy was when he was talking about hockey or anticipating an upcoming game.