

READING PASSAGE 1

*You should spend about 20 minutes on **Questions 1-13**, which are based on Reading Passage 1.*

Optimism and Health

If you have a positive outlook, the likelihood is that you will lead a longer life. John Nash examines the link between optimism and good health.

Medical studies are concluding that optimists really do have something to be cheerful about. Coincidental links between optimism and improved general health have been found by researchers. Recently, a Yale University psychologists' study of 660 volunteers aged 50 and above was published. It found that thinking positively about ageing adds an average of seven years to a person's life. The team, led by Dr Becca Levy, suggests that having an optimistic attitude can bolster the will to live, though they admit that they cannot explain it fully.

Another American research team, however, says they have identified a physical mechanism behind the phenomenon. Their eight-year study of 670 men aged about 63 found that the optimists had significantly better lung function than men who were more pessimistic. This is the first study to show such a link. The research team at Brigham & Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School believes that attitude somehow strengthens the immune system, and that adopting a more positive outlook may reverse physical decline. 'Preliminary studies on heart patients suggest that by changing a person's outlook, you can improve their mortality risk,' says Dr Rosalind Wright.

The role of optimism in good health has long been noted but often sidelined. Sigmund Freud, the influential psychologist, equated optimism with ignorance, and from 1970 to 2000 there were 46,000 psychology papers on depression and only 40 on joy.

Part of that negativity may be blamed on optimists themselves. They are not necessarily fun to have around, says Brice Pitt, the Emeritus Professor of the Psychiatry of Old Age at Imperial College, London. 'Optimists tend to be insufferable people. Always jolly, always up, and, frankly, they have a hopelessly rosy outlook,' he says. 'Depressive people see things as they really are, and that is a disadvantage from an evolutionary point of view. Optimism is a piece of evolutionary equipment that has carried us a long way through millennia of setbacks '

Studies show that optimists do better than pessimists in work, school and sports, suffer less depression, achieve more goals, respond better to stress and fight disease better. Among people aged from their mid-nineties into their hundreds, researchers generally fail to find consistencies in diet or exercise (and some still smoke). What the super-aged do tend to share, however, is a positive; optimistic outlook.

Toshihiko Maruta, of the Mayo Institute, headed an earlier American medical study to find a link between optimism and longevity. Her study found that optimists live about 19 per cent longer than people with grim outlooks. 'It tells us that mind and body are linked and that attitude has an impact on the final outcome: death,' she says. That simple message might have far more effect than exhortations to eat fresh fruit and warnings to stay out of

the sun.

Despite the benefits of unprecedented material wealth, the World Health Organisation estimates that depression is soon to become the second leading cause of disability. Popular wisdom blames this on our frenetically busy society. According to social forecasters at the Henley Centre, while people in developed countries are 65 per cent better off financially today than they were 15 years ago, there is no evidence that they are any more content with their lives. While much of this is down to the perception among many of being rushed and pressured for time and space, it is the perception not the reality that counts, they say.

The Henley researchers found that if people think they have enough time, space or money, they feel more relaxed about life, regardless of how much of these things they actually have. 'In terms of money, some of the people who "feel" wealthiest, and some of those who "feel" poorest; actually have almost the same amount of money at their disposal. Their attitudes and behaviour patterns, however, are different from one another' says Chad Wallens, a researcher.

Few studies have tried to ascertain the proportion of optimists in the world. But a 1995 nationwide survey conducted in the USA for the American magazine *Adweek* found that about half the population counted themselves as optimists, with women slightly more apt than men (53 per cent versus 48 per cent) to identify themselves thus. That attitude drops, however, to less than a third of people between the ages of 55 and 64, which supports research showing that men, in particular, tend to become more irritable as they get older. Lynn Myers, a psychotherapist, points out, however, that too much optimism can be a bad thing: 'You can be what is called a cock-eyed optimist, the sort of person who smokes but is convinced they will never get lung cancer.' Curiously, though, the Brigham & Women's Hospital study found that that optimism was linked to improved lung function even after smoking was taken into account.

Myers is skeptical about whether there is a simple way that people can become optimistic in order to improve their health chances. 'I certainly would not suggest that there is anything like "six easy lessons to change your outlook" But if you can lower your anxiety levels, it tends to make you more optimistic. Conversely, people who are highly anxious tend to be pessimistic,' she says.