

Groundhog Day

Although no one is sure exactly how the *groundhog* came to symbolize this day, February 2 has a long history as a significant calendar day. Most likely, the groundhog was a stand-in for the badger that was more familiar to the German ancestors of settlers in Pennsylvania. Legend has it that a cloudy Groundhog Day means spring will come early, while a sunny day predicts a longer winter.



Going back to medieval times, February 2¹ marked the mid-point of winter. The day was known as *Imbolc* to the ancient Celts (meaning “lamb’s milk” for the beginning of lambing season) or *Brigantia*, for the female deity of light. Later, early Christians renamed the day *Candlemas*. The beginning of February is a time to appreciate longer days.

Some see Groundhog Day as a time to choose between a hopeful view (only six more weeks until spring!) and a more pessimistic view (six dreadful weeks of winter to come!).

The movie *Groundhog Day*, where the character played by Bill Murray had to re-do the day until he got it right, could be interpreted as either being doomed to repeat a disastrous moment or as having a wonderful opportunity for a do-over. With that in mind, we are focusing this month on hope and optimism.

Optimism

Some people have, overall, a positive outlook on life. This relatively stable expectation that positive things will happen across many areas of life is called *dispositional optimism*.² This trait is linked to how people explain negative events or outcomes as due to external forces rather than being one’s own fault.

Optimism is important. Research has shown positive links between optimism and physical health. It appears optimistic people tend to live longer and have lower rates of serious diseases, such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, respiratory disease, and cancer.

Optimism and hope for the future may help people to cope better. They may also persist at problem-solving longer, maintain good health habits, and view stress in a more positive way. Optimists seem to have stronger social support networks, since other people may be drawn to their positive outlook.

Experts on optimism differ on whether a person can change this way of viewing the world. Some evidence suggests that people tend to become more optimistic over time. People with extended exposure to very distressing circumstances may become less optimistic.

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Optimism (continued from page 1)

While very few interventions have tried directly to help people increase their optimism, some studies have shown people can strengthen their optimistic views. For example, some gains in optimism were found for people who imagined their best possible self for 5 minutes each day for two weeks.

Hope

Hope³ is described as a bit more specific than optimism. While optimism is an overall sense that the future will be positive, hope is more a feeling right now of confidence that “I can get where I want to go.” While the two are related, optimism could result from feeling lucky, not capable, while hope includes a belief in one’s own capacity to make a better future. As with optimism, research on hope has consistently shown links to good health, longer life, productivity, academic success, and well-being.

Jerome Groopman,⁴ in his book *The Anatomy of Hope*, describe “real” hope as having a positive point of view in spite of accepting negative realities. He tells about a woman with cancer who said that she knew the odds were against her—a 90% chance of treatment failure—but chose to focus on her 10% chance of treatment success. Hope exists right alongside doubt and fear—it does not erase them.

Hope seems to come from four core beliefs:

- The future will be better than the present.
- I have the power to make the future better.
- There are many paths to my goals.
- No goal path is free of obstacles.



**Half full or
half empty?**

**Either way, it’s
important to stay
well hydrated!**

Building Hope and Optimism

What can we do to become more hopeful in the face of difficulties? Shane Lopez, in his book *Making Hope Happen*, suggests 3 main strategies that are built on the 4 core beliefs: set meaningful goals based on your strengths, take action towards your goals to increase your sense of agency and control over your future, identify (and follow) many pathways towards your goals, knowing that they will not all be easy or successful.

On February 2, and throughout this month, challenge yourself to see the positive in yourself and events you encounter. Consider your New Year’s resolutions, even if that means adjusting your goals. Reach out for support when you hit a roadblock. Try or create Plan C D or E when you encounter a challenge. Remind yourself of your strengths. Praise yourself for what you do accomplish. Remember, spring *will* come, and you *can* take steps today to make a better tomorrow. Regardless of the groundhog outcome During *February* keep focus on wellness in the 8 dimensions by building hope and optimism for yourself and share with others.

Make a Positivity Calendar!

Use these 50 positive thinking quotes to get you through February and most of March:

<https://everydaypowerblog.com/positive-thinking-quotes>

References and Resources

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1 Thanks to the Farmer’s Almanac: <https://www.almanac.com/content/groundhog-day-history-meaning-folklore>

2 The section on optimism was adapted from Scheier, M. F., & Carver, C. S. (2019). Dispositional optimism and physical health: A long look back, a quick look forward. *American Psychologist*, 73(9), 1082-1094.

3 The section on hope was adapted from the work of Charles “Rick” Snyder and from Lopez, S. J. (2013).

Making hope happen: Create the future you want for yourself and others. New York, NY: Atria Paperback.

4 Groopman, J. (2005). *The anatomy of hope: How people prevail in the face of illness*. NY, NY: Random House.

