

# Choosing Optimism

## What Is Optimism?

Optimism is a way of seeing life hopefully and having an expectation of success and well-being. Optimism correlates strongly with good health and effective coping strategies. Optimism is a learned trait and, if practiced, can become a way of thinking.

## Why Practice Optimism?

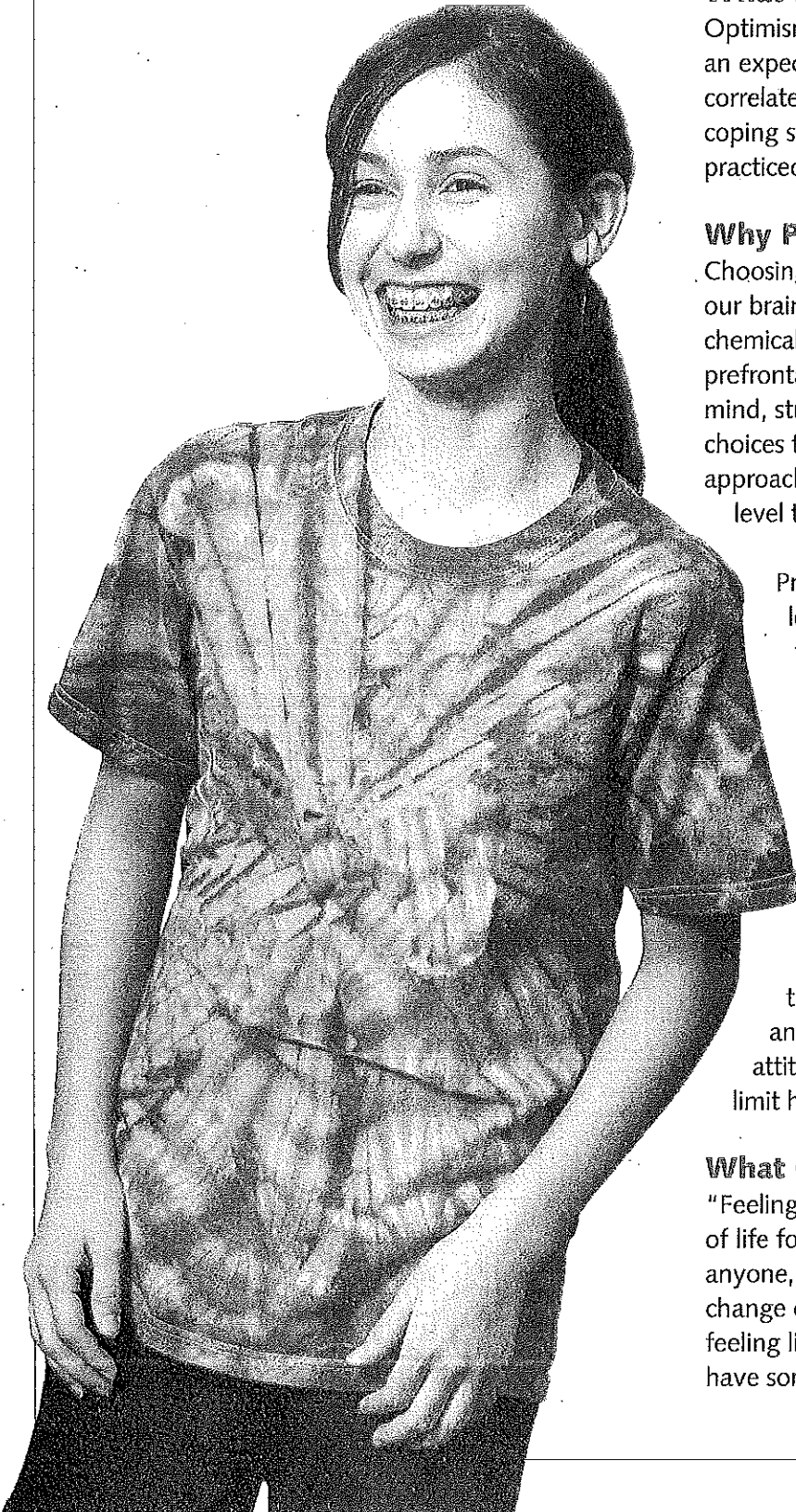
Choosing to view life optimistically can increase our brain capacity; it relaxes our amygdala, creates chemical balance in our brains, and allows our prefrontal cortex to take charge. In this frame of mind, students learn that they can make much better choices than if they take a negative or pessimistic approach, which effectively shuts down their higher-level thinking.

Practicing optimism also makes it easier to learn—optimistic thinkers prime their brains to be ready to focus and make more room for new information to be absorbed and new ideas to stretch their wings. Socially, practicing optimism allows students to strengthen their perspective-taking skills and accept viewpoints different from their own, as well as connect with other people. In this lesson, students explore the benefits of optimism and see how the “dark cloud” of pessimism negatively affects their ability to think and learn, make friends, and solve common problems. With a pessimistic attitude, a person can get bogged down and limit his or her ability to solve problems.

## What Can You Expect to Observe?

“Feeling tossed in a tempest of emotion is a way of life for middle school students. They, more than anyone, need a rudder-like tool that allows them to change direction. It makes the difference between feeling like a victim of your emotions or that you have some control.”

—Eighth-grade teacher

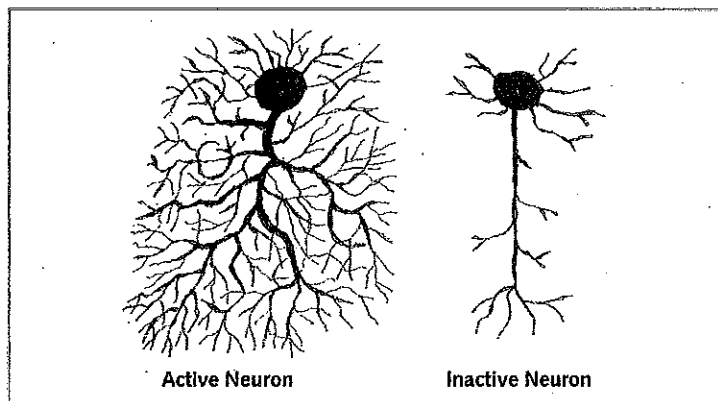


# Linking to Brain Research

## Optimism: A Learned Skill for Success

The research is clear—attitude matters! Students who are generally optimistic enjoy better physical health, have more success at school, flourish in relationships, and are more well equipped to handle stress in their lives. Brain research has confirmed that optimism is more a learned trait than a genetic one. We can train our brain to have an optimistic perspective, thanks to neuroplasticity. This brain process forms new branching-off dendrites and more neuron-to-neuron connections during repeated experiences and practice. When students regularly use self-talk for positive thinking and to work through everyday frustrations, neuroplasticity creates and strengthens nerve cell (neuron) connections in their brains.

Optimism is easily identified in brain scans. Levels of dopamine and other brain neurotransmitters rise, cortisol levels remain steady, and the amygdala is open and forwarding information to the prefrontal cortex. An optimistic state of mind enables a mindful response to stresses and a downplaying of thoughts of failure, frustration, and hopelessness. Optimism breeds the expectation of success, which in turn, makes it easier for the student to put forth the effort necessary to achieve that success.



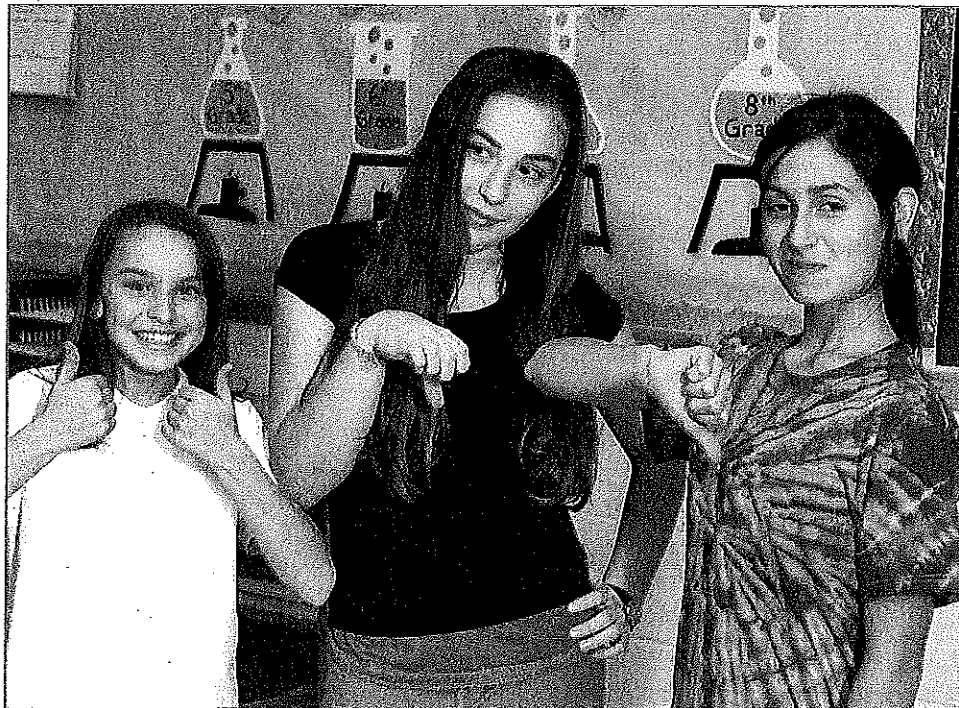
An active brain neuron, or nerve cell, forms many branching dendrites to make neural connections.

## Clarify for the Class

Neuroplasticity allows us to train our brains, as we train our bodies to learn a sport. Explain that during brain training, repeated thoughts and experiences strengthen neural pathways, which, over time, come into play automatically. Similarly, when we train for a sport or practice playing an instrument, we strengthen body parts and create muscle memory through repetition.

**Discuss:** What is a specific physical task—basketball layups, a sequence of dance moves, rapid texting, and so on—that was difficult to learn at first? How did you improve that skill? Think of at least three challenging times during the school day when you can practice positive thinking to foster optimism. What can you do to help your brain work better?

# Getting Ready



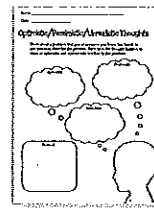
**“Over” or “Under” Optimistic?**  
Hand gestures help show whether a thought is “over” (unrealistic), “under” (pessimistic), or “right in the middle” (optimistic).

## GOALS

- Students will define optimistic and pessimistic mind-sets used to think about, react to, and approach a problem.
- Students will practice strategies that help them to develop and maintain optimism in their own lives.

## MATERIALS

- chart paper
- copies of advice columns from newspapers or printed out from on-line sources (preview to make sure all problems are age-appropriate)
- (optional) Optimistic/Pessimistic/Unrealistic Thoughts activity sheet (p. 157)



## CREATING THE OPTIMISTIC CLASSROOM

**Classroom Management** The strongest motivators for this age group are their peers. Ask students how they can help create a classroom culture that makes it okay to try and fail. You might ask them to come up with a class motto, such as: No mistakes = no learning. Ask students to share wise quotes, positive images, uplifting songs, and their own optimism. Suggested strategies:

- Invite students to post a “morning motivator” that will inspire their classmates for the day.
- Take a “motivation break” during a particularly complicated lesson.
- Encourage students to share success stories whenever appropriate.

understand  
the  
purpose



**Setting the Tone**  
Sharing funny stories is one way to set a light and optimistic tone in the classroom.

## MINDUP Warm-Up

### Optimism: Over and Under

Explain that optimism doesn't mean pretending that everything is great when it is not. Create a chart with three rows on the board. Label the top row "Unrealistic." Label the middle row "Optimistic." Label the bottom row "Pessimistic." Then brainstorm some situations that might cause students to worry, such as an upcoming test, a school dance, a new school year, or a sick relative.

Take one situation and model the three kinds of responses for the class. Using the example of an upcoming test, an unrealistic response might be, "I'll do great; I never need to study." The optimistic response might be, "I'll give it my best effort and get help if I need it; I'm confident I will be prepared." The pessimistic response might be, "There's no point in studying; I'll just fail anyway—I always do." Have students generate the three different responses to another situation.

**Discuss:** What do unrealistic and pessimistic thinking have in common? Which kind of thinking is most likely to lead to action? Which kind of thinking is most likely to see the world as all good or all bad? Which type of thinking gives you the most control over the situation?

# Leading the Lesson

## Optimism in Training

### Engage

#### What to Do

Ask students to reflect on the warm-up exercise. Get volunteers to offer a definition for optimism.

- What happens to your ability to solve problems when you are insufficiently optimistic?
- What happens to your ability to solve problems if you are overly optimistic?

Guide students to understand that optimistic thinking not only makes you happier, but also makes you a better problem solver. Pessimistic thinking leads you to feel discouraged and frustrated, and have little hope when faced with problems. Unrealistic thinking does not even acknowledge the problem.

Read these statements aloud (or create your own examples). Have students give a thumbs-up if they think the statement is optimistic and a thumbs-down if they think it is pessimistic or unrealistic.

"No swimming today! The rain spoiled everything."

"So what if it's raining? We can go to a movie instead."

"Forget about the weather. Let's just go swimming anyway."

### Explore

Distribute copies of the advice column you pre-screened. Explain to students that they are going to hunt for examples of optimistic, pessimistic, and unrealistic thinking.

- Who can give an example of pessimistic thinking?
- Who can give an example of optimistic thinking?
- Was there any unrealistic thinking? If not, can you explain why?

Have students write out their ideas in the thought bubbles on the Optimistic/Pessimistic/Unrealistic Thoughts activity sheet.

- Which kind of thinking uses input from your prefrontal cortex?
- Which kind of thinking is influenced by the amygdala?

### Why It's Important

This introduction helps students understand that optimistic thinking is a tool people can adopt.

**NOTE:** It is best to avoid labeling a person as "an optimist" or "a pessimist." We want students to think of optimism as a function of the brain's neuroplasticity, not as a hard-wired quality.

It's helpful to discuss optimism using the brain framework. Pessimistic and unrealistic thinking are influenced by the amygdala and shuts down higher-order thinking. The PFC gets more and clearer information from a calm amygdala, so works much better when problems are looked at realistically but with hope and confidence. Research shows that optimistic thinking makes people happier, healthier, and more successful in school and life.



### From the Research

Mindfulness has been found to be related to well-being including optimism, positive affect, self-regulation, and lower rates of depression and anxiety. (Brown & Ryan, 2003)

### Reflect

Generate a class list of strategies students can use to adopt an optimistic perspective so their brain can stay healthy and work better.

- Considering other perspectives is one way to train your brain to think in a more open, positive way.
- What are some other ways to train your brain to think optimistically?
- How can you avoid a pessimistic or unrealistic way of thinking?

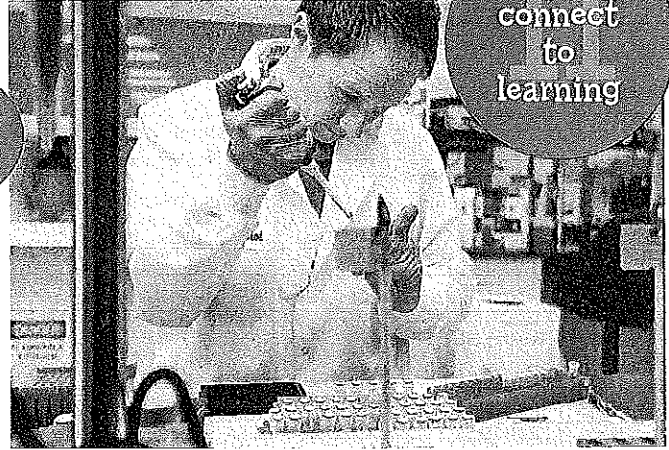
Record students' ideas on an "Our Best Ways to Stay Optimistic" class list that you can post in the room. Encourage students to keep a personal list as well. Ideas might include looking at another perspective on a problem, replacing a negative thought about something with a positive one, reminding ourselves that a worry is a feeling that can pass, doing a mindful breathing or sensing exercise, playing a game, singing a song, or sharing a joke.

This reflection should guide students to conclude that:

- Optimistic thinkers are happier, healthier, and more successful people.
- Optimistic thinking helps us to solve problems.
- We can choose to be optimistic and practice optimism so that it becomes a mind-set.

choosing optimism

connect  
to  
learning



## MINDUP In the Real World

### Career Connection

Although it may seem incongruous, hope and optimism often motivate medical researchers. Effective researchers are optimistic that a cure exists and believe that with enough patience and perseverance, determination and diligence, they will find a cure that will save thousands of lives. So often against all odds—working impossibly long hours with limited funds—medical researchers press on through endless samples and tests, hoping the next slide under the microscope will reveal the answer. What could be more optimistic than that?

**Discuss:** How might farmers, stockbrokers, and real estate developers depend on an optimistic outlook to conduct their work?

### Once a Day

Before students leave for the period or the day, have them think of one thing they learned or enjoyed in class. Invite them to either tell it to you as they leave or write it on an "optimistic exit" card and hand it to you as they leave. This helps you assess what they have accomplished and highlights for them how they've benefitted from learning.

# Connecting to the Curriculum

Learning about optimism supports students' connection to their own learning process and to the content areas and literature.

## Journal Writing

Encourage your students to reflect on what they've learned about choosing optimism and to record questions to explore at another time. They may also enjoy responding to these prompts:

- Start a page with the words "Happiness is...." Make a list of as many things as you can think of. Return to your list whenever you think of something new to add. Return to it whenever you need a mood boost.
- Put one of your worries into perspective. In the first panel show the worst-case scenario. In the second panel show the best-case scenario. In the last panel, show the most likely scenario.
- Make a collage of goals. Try to depict goals that you have the power to accomplish—not like winning the lotto! You can use words and images to represent your goals. Put the collage in a place that is easily visible.
- Write your success story. Think of a time when you solved a problem, met a goal, or changed your attitude to be more optimistic. Explain what you accomplished, how you did it, and how it made you feel.



## LANGUAGE ARTS

### Comedy Sketch

#### What to Do

Pessimism and unrealistic optimism are staples of humor. Both kinds of thinking can create a gap between attitude and reality; the dissonance is often funny. Since students love to make each other laugh, give them the opportunity to work with a partner or a small group to come up with a comedy sketch about pessimism or unrealistic optimism.

#### What to Say

*Work with a partner or a small group to come up with a funny scene that involves a character who is unrealistically optimistic or very pessimistic. The humor is in the character's inability to see the situation realistically. The tiny mouse that wants to fight an elephant is funny. The elephant scared of the mouse is also funny. Use these concepts to make your classmates laugh.*

#### Why It's Important

One way to help students become more objective in their thinking is to show the humor in extreme thinking. Pessimistic thinking and unrealistic thinking are both very self-serious. Exposing both attitudes to humor helps deflate them. Laughter calms the amygdala and releases the PFC from the grip of emotion. Being able to laugh at oneself is a great remedy for distorted thinking.

## SOCIAL STUDIES

### Profiles in Optimism

#### What to Do

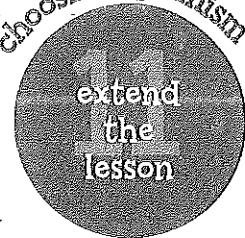
Explain to students that history is full of optimistic thinkers, who see possibility where others see problems. People often mistake them for unrealistic thinkers; if they were unrealistic, they wouldn't be able to see the obstacles and overcome them.

#### What to Say

*Think of some of the people you've studied in social studies class. Think of people who explored new lands. Think of people who fought for freedom. Think of people who fought for justice. Think of people who overcame great odds. Choose someone who inspires you. Do some background research in the library or online and write a short biography of this person. Focus on how optimistic thinking was necessary to this person's success.*

#### Why It's Important

Finding a role model from history helps them make a personal connection to what they are learning. Remaining optimistic in the face of serious challenges is inspiring, and finding inspiration helps foster optimism.



SCIENCE

## Experiments in Optimism

**What to Do**

Point out that every scientific discovery has depended on optimistic thinking. Without optimistic thinking, no one would have the patience to study, observe, and test new hypotheses. Scientists must proceed with confidence as they commit themselves to doing something that hasn't been done before. Prepare some examples for students, such as the first suspension bridge, the polio vaccine, the lunar landing.

**What to Say**

*All advances in science and technology come from optimistic thinking. Humans would still be sitting around waiting for a lightning strike to cook their food if they didn't have confidence in their own ability to make fire. Tell the story of an important discovery or advance. Focus on the role of optimism in the process. Explain the obstacles and how they were overcome.*

**Why It's Important**

Science is often seen as a dry subject because it requires objectivity. However, the people responsible for the greatest advances were dreamers. They had to believe that what they were doing was possible, even if it had never been tried. This perspective will reinforce that optimism and problem solving go hand in hand.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

## Opposite Mimes

**What to Do**

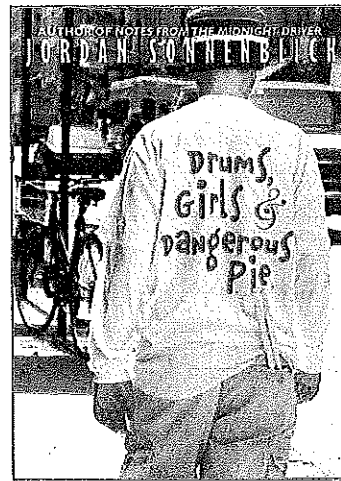
Have students generate a list of things that might lead to pessimistic thinking. Select a couple of scenarios that lend themselves to being acted out and assign each pair one of the scenarios. One partner will act out the scenario in a pessimistic way. The other will act it out in an optimistic way.

**What to Say**

*Have you ever gotten pessimistic about doing a task? What about when your team was losing? What was your body language? What was your facial expression? Imagine going through the same scenario with an optimistic attitude. Practice acting out the scenario in silence. One partner will act it out pessimistically and the other will act it out optimistically.*

**Why It's Important**

Students at this age are very concerned with their appearance and may be surprised at how clearly optimistic and pessimistic attitudes are communicated to others. Discuss how simple comportment choices like smiling can support optimism.



## Literature Link Drums, Girls, and Dangerous Pie

by Jordan Sonneblick  
(2004). New York: Scholastic.

Steven Alper has typical problems. He likes a girl. He has an annoying younger brother. He has a typical wise-guy attitude. But his life soon gets a lot rougher when his younger brother is diagnosed with cancer. Suddenly, his attitude and how he responds to the new situation is no laughing matter.

Connect this book to the idea of finding the healthiest way to respond to difficult situations. Even when we can't control what is happening around us, we can still control ourselves.

## More Books to Share

- Gallo, Donald, ed. (2003). *Destination Unexpected*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.
- Koertge, Ronald. (2006). *Shakespeare Bats Cleanup*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.
- Ryan, Pam Muñoz. (2002). *Esperanza Rising*. New York: Scholastic.



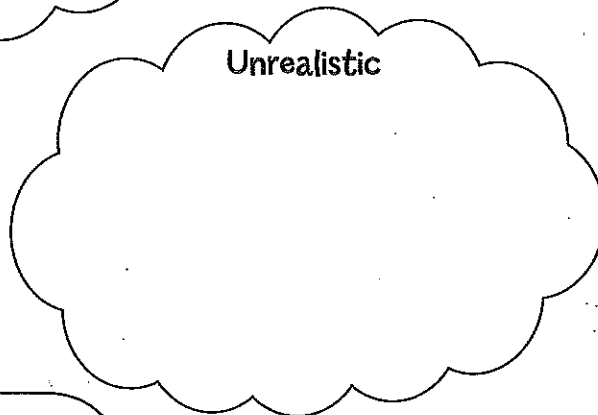
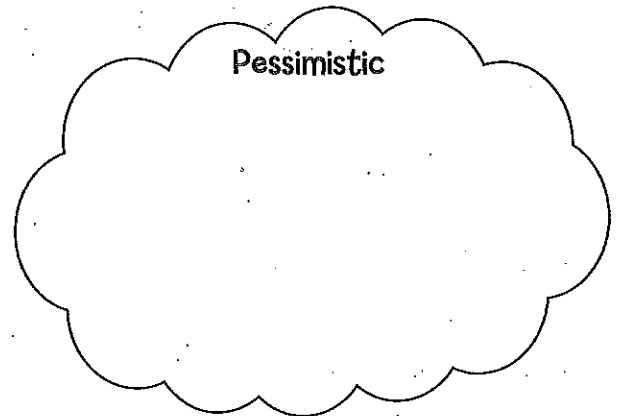
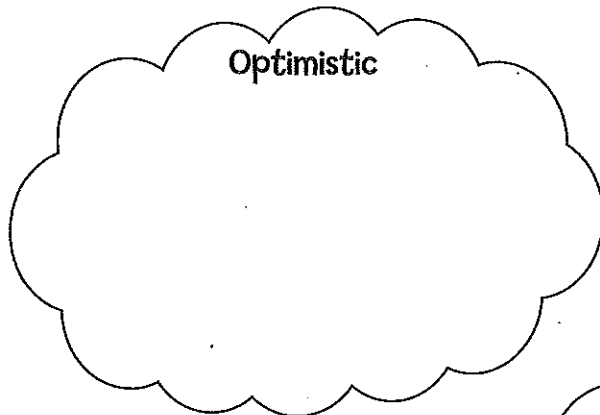


Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

# Optimistic/Pessimistic/Unrealistic Thoughts

Think about a problem that you or someone you know has faced. In one sentence, describe the problem. Then fill in the thought bubbles to show an optimistic and a pessimistic reaction to the problem.



Problem!

A large, rounded rectangular box with the word "Problem!" written inside. It is the starting point for the thought bubbles.