

Optimism Bias

What is optimism bias?

It's normal and healthy for people to think about themselves with what's called an optimism bias. Generally we believe that bad things are less likely to happen, and good things are more likely to happen to me, than people like me.

This belief is not based on any sound reasoning or actual evidence, just a positive inclination or feeling. Experience can reinforce a positive expectation of the future.

Optimism is important because it relieves stress and anxiety. Most importantly, optimism influences our motivation, particularly our safety motivation. We take risks because we believe, "*It's not going to happen to me*" or "*If it does happen, I can handle it*".

Traditional driver training may not produce safer drivers because it promotes unrealistically optimism. Importantly, optimism can be learnt.

What driving experiences promote optimism?

Crashing is rare, even for problem drivers. That means it is normal for ordinary drivers to take risks and not crash. Here are some of the things that can lead a driver to view their chances of being hurt in a crash with unrealistic optimism:

- Years of driving without crashing
- Seeing or hearing about other drivers who do crash
- Seeing or hearing about other drivers who behave badly
- Believing it is the young drivers, older drivers or tourists who are the problem

Driver training and optimism

Much international research has been done to learn what training works and what doesn't. Here are some driver training activities that almost certainly contribute to unrealistic optimism, and should be avoided:

- Skid control
- Emergency braking
- Emergency lane-change
- ABS/Traction-Control/Stability-Control exercises

Teaching to prevent unrealistic optimism

Not only are there proven teaching strategies to avoid optimism bias, there are 'Thinking Skills' drivers can use to maintain a realistic world view. The 4-Ways Driver Training Model[®] includes these strategies and positively influences personal safety motivation, reducing risk taking behaviour.

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