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Jenice Armstrong: There is a bright side



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PRESIDENT Obama reminded us again last week that we need to have the audacity to hope.

"We will rebuild. We will recover, and the United States of America will emerge stronger than before," the cheerleader-in-chief said.

That was *last* week.

It can be hard to maintain an Obama-level of optimism when you're waiting for the sheriff to show up at your foreclosed house or worrying if your job is on the layoff list. Let's not even talk about Monday's stock market tanking.

Normally, I am optimistic almost to a fault.

But there's only so much a person can take.

This is where **Dana Lightman** comes in. A local psychotherapist who works out of her home in Abington, her speciality is helping clients learn to - excuse the cliché - look on the bright side. She has built a practice around the idea that optimism can be learned. In other words, a glass-half-empty kind of person can be converted to a glass-half-full mind-set.

One of her e-mails landed in my inbox this week and I decided to call her up to see what she had say for herself.

"I tend to see things from a positive perspective and find it fun to help people do it," Lightman told me during a phone conversation.

Growing up in Mount Airy and Upper Dublin, Lightman was one of those people with a naturally sunny disposition. Like women everywhere, she struggled with such issues as body image, finding a romantic partner and her career, but still managed to find the positive side of things. It was while doing research for her dissertation on elderly widows who recovered quickly that Lightman noticed how optimistic subjects were far more resilient than pessimistic ones.

"I became intrigued by optimism. You can learn how to be more optimistic," she pointed out. "The basic theory is, your interpretation of an event is more important than the event itself."

In other words, you can say, "I am out of a job. I can either think about this as an opportunity to create something for myself or you can say, 'I am a loser,'" Lightman said.

So, instead of being depressed that someone you know found a job and you didn't, you can say to yourself, "If she found a job, then I will too."

"The way you think about it will either open you up or shut you down to despair and hopelessness," Lightman says.

As an example of someone who managed to stay positive even in the face of defeat, she pointed to **Carla Hall**, a losing contestant from the fifth season of TV's "Top Chef." "She never threw anybody under the bus. She said, 'This is where I made a mistake.' It didn't work out for her, but she didn't become defensive. She didn't become a victim. She maintained a sense of empowerment."

Lightman started her Power Optimism program in 2001, prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Girlfriend had no idea how apropos her timing would turn out to be.

"Not only has the rug been pulled out from under us as a nation, we are struggling to stand up and move forward," she said.

In honor of National Optimism Month, which is recognized in March, she offers the following tips for remaining hopeful during trying times:

1. Stay informed, but don't dwell excessively on the negative. Look for positive, feel-good stories.
2. When good things happen, make a conscious decision to take note of them and reflect back on the event with positive thoughts and feelings.
3. Take a positive time-out. Take a walk. Exercise. Watch the birds or enjoy TV.
4. Try not to dwell on your problems. Instead, be solution-oriented.
5. Realize the one thing you can always control is how you respond to events and situations. *