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# Australian Wellbeing Insights

Optimism

April 2025



# NAB Wellbeing Insights

## Optimism

### Interview with Victor Perton, Founder & Chief Optimism Officer of The Centre for Optimism.

**Being an optimist means much more than simply being positive.** The Centre for Optimism defines it as “an expectation that good things will happen and that things will work out in the end.” Optimism is aligned with hope. And it matters. So much so that NAB CEO Andrew Irvine recently wrote to every NAB business customer sharing his optimism for the year ahead. Optimistic individuals and communities are more likely to take risks, problem solve, invest in new ideas, build stronger relationships and cope better with adversity. Optimism can coexist with current struggles, doubts, and difficulties. With so much uncertainty in the world today this interview with Victor Perton provides a timely reminder that while we can acknowledge today's challenges, we must also maintain faith in tomorrow's possibilities.

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**Victor Perton is the Founder and Chief Optimism Officer of The Centre for Optimism. Victor is the Author of “Optimism: The How and Why”. The Centre for Optimism was born out of the research of The Australian Leadership Project which studied Australian leadership and its qualities. Victor’s background includes stints as Commissioner to the Americas, 18 years as a parliamentarian, practice as a barrister, mediator, arbitrator, businessman and board service. Victor was a Senior Engagement Adviser to the Australian G20 presidency focused on the G20 Finance Ministers & Central Bank Governors Meetings & the Brisbane G20 Leaders’ Summit.**

*Dean Pearson (NAB)*

*Hi Victor, how do you define optimism, and how does it influence your outlook on life?*

**Victor Perton:**

**Optimism is the expectation that good things will happen and that things will work out in the end.**

It’s a mindset rooted in possibility, a habit that shapes daily life, and a philosophy that inspires action. Optimism empowers people to see opportunity in challenge, to lead with purpose, and to live with resilience and hope.

**The Optimism Principle states: “The answer to life’s most pressing questions is optimism.”**

It’s not a slogan or wishful thinking. It’s the synthesis of over ten years of research, interviews, and lived experience in optimistic leadership, culture, and wellbeing. It reflects what people value most in their leaders and what society needs most to flourish. Human progress and personal development depend on it.

I live my own recommendations on how to become more optimistic. I smile and say hello to everyone I pass. I have replaced the bland greeting “How are you?” with a question that invites joy and reflection: **“What’s been the best thing in your day?”**

Eight out of ten people respond with a happy or meaningful story. That simple question often lights up their face and opens the door to connection and positivity.

I'm fortunate to work with people bringing optimism into hospitals, universities, schools, and corporations. But for me, optimism is not just something I teach or speak about. It's something I live. It guides how I lead, how I relate to others, and how I move through the world.

Optimism sees the world clearly and still believes in better. It's the mindset that shapes a better future, one smile, one question, and one action at a time.

**Optimism is a state of mind, not a state of the world.** And when you choose that state of mind deliberately and daily you begin to change the state of the world around you.

**Dean:**

**What are some of the most common misconceptions about optimism?**

**Victor:**

One of the most common misconceptions about optimism is that it's naïve - somehow disconnected from reality. People often think that optimists ignore the hard stuff or pretend everything is fine.

That's simply not true.

Real optimism is not the denial of difficulty, it's the decision to face it with hope and purpose. It sees the world clearly, acknowledges the challenges, and still chooses to believe in better outcomes. In fact, the most effective optimists are often the most clear-eyed realists.

They're the ones who say, "Yes, this is hard - but let's find a way forward."

Another myth is that optimism is something you are either optimistic or pessimistic and that it is an inherited personality trait. In truth, optimism is a learnable skill, a daily habit, and a leadership choice. You can build it. You can strengthen it. And you can spread it.

Some also believe that optimism is about being positive all the time. But optimism doesn't mean avoiding sadness, fear, or frustration. It means you don't get stuck in those emotions. You choose to return to hope.

I encourage people to read Viktor Frankl's chapter on "Tragic Optimism" in *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankl, a Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist, wrote that even in the midst of unavoidable suffering, we can still find meaning and choose an optimistic response. That's not blind faith - it's deep, purposeful optimism.

Likewise, Hans Rosling's *Factfulness* is essential reading for anyone who thinks the world is in decline. Rosling uses decades of data to show that, despite headlines, the world is improving in countless ways - from health to education to poverty reduction. He calls it "fact-based optimism", and it's the antidote to despair.

Anyone who remembers "the good old days" has a bad memory.

People sometimes equate optimism with sugar-coating the truth. Optimism doesn't sugar-coat. It wraps the challenge in belief, direction, and the conviction that we can shape better outcomes.

In my work across sectors - from healthcare to education to corporate leadership - I've seen these myths melt away when people experience optimism in action: a warm greeting, a reframing of the negative, a purposeful question.

That's when optimism becomes authentic, practical, and magnetic.

**Dean:**

**Why do you think more Australians are reporting feeling pessimistic right now?**

**Victor:**

Yes, more Australians are reporting feelings of pessimism, and this isn't just a momentary trend. It's a deeply embedded shift that's been growing for over a decade.

The data shows a compelling paradox:

- **Australians are optimistic about themselves and their families** - we believe in our own resilience.
- **However, migrant and refugee Australians are, on average, much more optimistic than the Australian-born.**

They tend to see more possibility, more opportunity, and more hope. This speaks volumes about the role of perspective, gratitude, and lived experience in shaping optimism.

Yet when we zoom out to the collective - our government, our economy, our global future - the mood darkens.

Australians increasingly report bleakness toward the future of the country and the world. It's a growing narrative of disempowerment. And this isn't unique to us - it's most apparent across the English-speaking world and much of the developed West, where trust in institutions has eroded and collective narratives have turned cynical.

Inside large corporations, the pattern is even more concerning. Many Australians report bleakness about leadership in their own workplaces. Not because they lack personal drive or hope - but because they don't see purpose, vision, or optimism in their leaders.

This matters. Because as Singapore's President Tharman Shanmugaratnam warned, the collapse of optimism is the most serious public policy problem facing the world. Without optimism, we don't make bold decisions. We don't build for the long term. We don't tackle the great shared challenges - climate, water, equity, innovation.

The **World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2025** placed declining optimism as the #1 risk to the global economy. That's no accident. Optimism is infrastructure. It is the invisible force that underpins investment, creativity, and human flourishing.

We must stop treating optimism as a luxury emotion. It's not. It's a **strategic national resource**, and it needs cultivating.

This is our call to action:

- To spark a new national conversation based on hope, not helplessness.
- To elevate migrant optimism as a source of strength.
- To demand leadership that believes in better and speaks it.
- To restore optimism as a civic, corporate, and cultural default.

Because optimism isn't the opposite of realism. It is realism - with a belief in better outcomes.

What can we do now?

- **Ask "What makes you optimistic?" often and everywhere.**
- **Amplify the voices of migrant Australians.** They hold a mirror to what's still possible.
- **Encourage optimistic leadership** in our corporations, schools, and parliaments.
- **Reclaim the public narrative** through art, education, and media that spotlight progress.

**Dean:**

***How do you maintain a positive attitude when facing challenges and setbacks or hearing bad news in the media?***

**Victor:**

There are two different questions here, each with its own answer.

**When I face personal challenges and setbacks, I always begin with a simple question: “What can I do?”**

That question restores agency. It turns pain into possibility.

I’ve had my share of career disappointments and setbacks - moments when things felt unfair or uncertain. But I chose persistence over bitterness. And in time, that persistence led to remarkable opportunities: I was honoured to serve as Trade and Investment Commissioner to the Americas, and later as a senior adviser to the G20 presidency.

Those weren’t just roles - they were reminders that optimism backed by action changes everything.

I also carry a perspective deeply rooted in my family story.

My ancestors endured invasion and imprisonment, and my parents were stateless refugees. They faced real, existential threats - moments where survival itself was uncertain. Compared to them, my challenges are minor. I carry their resilience with me. And I know that if they could face hardship with courage and hope, so can I.

One of my most enduring tools through it all? Humour.

I’m a great believer in the power of Australian self-deprecating humour - the kind that cuts through tension, brings people together and reminds us not to take ourselves too seriously. A good laugh in the darkness can be the torchlight that keeps you moving forward.

**When I hear bad news in the media, I remind myself that the news is not the world.**

Today’s media landscape delivers a relentless wave of fear, conflict, and division.

Over 90% of what we hear is negative. But that’s not reality – it’s the algorithm.

So we take action. At The Centre for Optimism, we gather those facing the most complex global challenges - Ukrainian, Sudanese, and Congolese communities - and hold conversations on optimism in crisis. What emerges isn’t denial. It’s resilience. It’s extraordinary courage. And it’s contagious.

In the face of climate anxiety, we lead with climate optimism, spotlighting progress and innovation. And through initiatives like the Nelson Mandela Youth Leadership Summit, we invest in the voices and visions of young people who believe in a better future - and are building it.

We don’t fight pessimism with platitudes. We fight it with action, with perspective, and with a relentless belief in human potential.

Practical Optimism Habits:

- **Ask, “What can I do?”** in any setback – it’s your power move.
- **Keep perspective:** what’s hard today is often growth tomorrow.
- **Use humour** - it lifts others and strengthens your own spirit.
- **Be a curator of good news and good people** - optimism is contagious.

**Dean:**

***How important is optimism for the economy?***

**Victor:**

Optimism isn't just important, it's foundational to prosperity, progress, and problem-solving.

At The Centre for Optimism, we speak of the Optimism Economy: the idea that belief in a better future is not a luxury - it's infrastructure. Optimism fuels innovation, drives productivity, and underpins trust and long-term decision-making.

**Is it any coincidence that Australian productivity has declined as pessimism has risen?**

**Or that Australian real incomes are falling, while AICD data shows that most corporate board directors today are pessimists, not optimists?**

This isn't anecdotal, it's structural.

John Maynard Keynes called it "animal spirits" - that confidence and instinct that spark economic activity. And Daniel Kahneman later proved that progress depends on "unrealistic optimism".

"The chances of success are objectively low," Kahneman wrote, "yet optimistic individuals are more likely to initiate change, believing they will beat the odds."

In fact, optimism is the defining trait of the entrepreneur. It turns doubt into action. It's what fuels every breakthrough - from startups to space travel.

And now, we have economic data.

The University of Sydney's Optimism Effect study revealed that countries and corporations with higher levels of producer optimism - meaning optimism within leadership - invest more in R&D, generate more innovation, and deliver stronger long-term productivity.

But here's the alarm bell:

The **World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2025** ranked declining optimism as the #1 global risk to the economy. Why? Because without optimism, we don't invest, collaborate, or act boldly. We freeze. We shrink. We retreat.

Thankfully, the problem is being recognised at the highest levels.

At the October 2024 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), leaders from across the globe committed to a shared mission: "To restore hope and optimism in our common future."

That's not just a sentiment it's a call to action. Because optimism isn't soft, it's strategic. It is essential to sound strategy, courageous leadership, meaningful change, and resilient economies.

Without optimism:

- Strategy stalls.
- Innovation dries up.
- Resilience weakens.
- Economies contract.

With optimism:

- **People act.**
- **Businesses build.**
- **Nations rise.**

Optimism is the defining trait of entrepreneurs and successful leaders.

It's essential for strategy, transformation, and resilience.

The Optimism Effect proves optimism drives national and organisational outcomes.

The WEF and CHOGM have identified declining optimism as a global emergency - and restoring it a leadership imperative.

**Dean:**

***And finally Victor, what are you most optimistic about?***

**Victor:**

The other day on The Optimism Man podcast, I asked an American guest this question "What makes you optimistic" He paused thoughtfully, smiled, and said:

**"I'm optimistic about optimism."**

I loved that. And I've embraced it ever since.

Because optimism is rising - quietly, steadily, and powerfully.

It's in the voices of young leaders at the Nelson Mandela Youth Leadership Summit.

It's in the courage of migrant communities who have overcome extraordinary adversity and still speak with hope.

It's in the boardrooms, schools, and communities where people are asking not, "What's wrong?" but "What's next?"

That's what makes me optimistic:

- **The hunger for purpose** I see in people;
- **The resilience of everyday Australians;**
- **The shift in leadership conversations** from fear to possibility;
- **It's in the breakthroughs of science and technology** powered by optimism that deliver clean energy, life-saving medicine, and solutions we once thought impossible;
- And most of all, **the people I meet who light up** when asked this very question.

I've asked thousands of people around the world, **"What makes you optimistic?"** And the answers are never trivial. They're filled with family, faith, kindness, innovation, and a belief in human goodness.

Optimism is not a denial of difficulty; it's a decision to act with hope, even when the outcome is uncertain.

And that, more than anything, is what makes me optimistic.

***"What makes you optimistic?"***

That one question can change your outlook, your team, and perhaps even your future.

**Dean:**

***Thank-you Victor, I'm feeling more optimistic already!***



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An aerial, high-angle photograph of a crowded beach. Numerous people are scattered across the golden sand, many lying on towels or blankets. A variety of colorful beach umbrellas are open, providing shade. The scene is bright and sunny, with long shadows cast by the people and umbrellas. The overall atmosphere is one of a busy, popular beach destination.

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