

# A Dose of Realistic Optimism for Surgeons

**Dr. Aparna Govil Bhasker; MBBS, MS**  
Bariatric and Laparoscopic surgeon-India



**T**aking a decision to get a surgery done is not an easy one. Patients and their families derive a lot of clues from the surgeon's demeanour and body language which helps them to take these decisions. Even the smallest of surgical procedures can lead to grave complications and rarely can even lead to mortality. As the complexity of the operation increases, so does the chance of having complications. Most patients and their families suffer from "optimism bias" and despite being informed about complications during a consultation, they tend to filter the information related to bad news. Hence the onus is on the surgeon to drive the point home. In an increasingly litigious environment, surgeons have to tread carefully on the fine line between being optimistic and being brutally honest.

Well, the solution to this conundrum may probably be found in realistic optimism. I have always believed that surgery is a very humbling branch. While surgeons may be vested with the power to cure many diseases, all of us are well aware that however skilled and experienced we may be, we can never get to a zero percent complication rate. We all know that failure can strike us at any time. Sometimes it could be because of an unintentional mistake and at other times we just lose to the forces of nature. Law of averages eventually catches up with all of us some day. Despite this awareness, most of us choose to go on. "Action, heroism, certainty and optimism", are some of the key tenets of surgical culture all across the world.

We take all risks into account and perform new operations every day. Should we attribute this to heroism? I guess our non-surgical colleagues may agree to that. However, being a surgeon myself, I know that what drives us is not heroism, but optimism. Not just optimism, I would say that it is actually realistic optimism that drives most surgeons.

So, what is "realistic optimism" and how do we apply it to the surgical practice? How is it even more relevant in today's times?

Optimism is a necessity. However, unrealistic optimism can sometimes be misconstrued as having a non-challant and uncaring attitude. In worst case scenarios, unrealistic optimists may be treading on waters of denial. When it comes to surgery or taking surgical decisions this would translate into ignoring possible risks and complications and focusing only on the positives. In a scenario where things may not go our way, it comes as a shock to the patient and their family. Despite the good intent of the doctor/surgeon, this forms for a perfect setting for a litigation. During the Covid-19 pandemic not taking the added risk into account would border onto sheer foolhardiness.

On the other end of the spectrum is unrealistic pessimism. Unrealistic pessimists would go on to highlight the negatives much more than the positives. They would downplay the possible benefits of a particular procedure and focus a lot more on the side effects and complications. While it is important to keep our patients informed, it is also necessary to have some perspective. Treatments and surgical operations only come into common practice when their benefits are significantly more than the risks. No doctor deliberately wants to harm their patients but sometimes in trying to be honest we may tip over the scales to being too pessimistic. An over defensive doctor may unknowingly take away hope and push the patient into denying treatment.

This finally brings me to the middle ground and we all have to ultimately choose between being realistically pessimistic and realistically optimistic. Being realistically pessimistic is considered as a safe zone for certain professions and surgery is one of them. It is said to prepare patients and their families better for any eventuality. It also takes the onus of liability away from the doctor/surgeon. As surgeons we are an integral part of the tragedies of our patients and their families. Being realistically pessimistic helps us to maintain a certain degree of detachment which is necessary for

our own survival. It prevents over involvement and protects surgeons as they venture into the unfamiliar territory of taking high stake decisions.

All said and done, doctors are human too. What ails the world today, ails us too. However, we also have to move forward and rise to the occasion to do right by our patients. We have to take the risks into account but ultimately, we have to move towards resilience. As we do this, we have to take our patients and their families along with us on the road to realistic optimism. While personal impact of negative outcomes can never be compared to statistics of complications, as doctors/surgeons we cannot take away hope from millions of patients. Just as patients must be made aware of all possible negative outcomes, they must also be made aware of the tangible benefits of the treatment being offered. Risk taking is a part of the journey towards a better life. As surgeons we become a part of this journey along with our patients. We have to help them to be able to objectively weigh the pros and cons and reach to a decision taken mutually for their betterment. Being realistically optimistic helps to ease the tension for a patient and their family and clear a partially cloudy disposition. At times carefully chosen words of optimism may be just the ice-breaker that was needed in order to reach to a life-saving decision.

As surgeons we need to develop resilience and realistic optimism. We have no option but to become comfortable with ambiguity. None of us will be a hundred percent right or wrong in our decisions but ultimately whatever happens, in our hearts we must know that whatever we are doing is in the best interest of the people that we are serving.

Unrealistic Pessimism ⇌ Realistic Pessimistic ⇌ Realistic optimism ⇌ Unrealistic Optimism