



Learned Optimism

How to Change Your Mind and Your Life

by Martin E.P. Seligman

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336 pages

Focus

Leadership & Mgt.
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Concepts & Trends

Take-Aways

- Whether you are a pessimist or an optimist depends on how you explain bad events to yourself.
- Your mother and teachers had the most influence on your "explanatory style."
- Pessimists often personalize bad life events, attributing them to permanent, pervasive causes. Yet they ascribe temporary, impersonal, specific causes to good events.
- The projection of present despair into the future causes hopelessness.
- By contrast, optimists externalize adversity's causes and see them as fleeting and specific. They credit good events to personal, permanent, pervasive causes.
- Optimists are much quicker than pessimists to get over a setback and try again.
- Pessimists have one advantage over optimists: they are better at realistically assessing their situations.
- Optimists tend to exaggerate the control they have over events.
- Pessimism is a reliable predictor of depression.
- Through cognitive therapy, it's possible to change your "explanatory style" to be more optimistic.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall

9

Applicability

8

Innovation

9

Style

8

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Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) Why optimists succeed more than pessimists; 2) How to change and become more optimistic; and 3) Why this matters to you and your children.

Recommendation

Despite equal talent and drive, it turns out that optimists will succeed where pessimists fear to tread. The good news is that you can learn optimism and lean on it to respond to adversity and inculcate greater resilience. Through descriptions of dozens of studies performed since the '70s, author Martin Seligman conveys the history and landscape that define "positive psychology," the science he helped to found. He offers cognitive techniques designed to tweak your natural disposition and give you the advantage of optimism. *getAbstract* recommends this book as a seminal work of positive psychology.

Abstract

Half Empty, Half Full

Three modern forces have converged to cause an epidemic of depression, particularly in rich, free, prosperous America: 1) the greater emphasis on the individual; 2) the erosion of shared social experiences; and 3) the priority on developing high self-esteem. This societal priority emerged even though self-esteem is a product of success, not a cause. Research suggests that unwarranted high self-regard can lead to violent and criminal behavior. Instead of pushing for self-esteem, parents and educators should be teaching optimism.

The way that the little voice in your head explains your circumstances to you is your "explanatory style." It could be keeping you in a pessimistic funk and generating a belief in your own helplessness. Developing a more optimistic explanatory style can lead you out of that rut. Pessimists see setbacks as perpetual, pervasive and personal. But optimists bounce back from setbacks because they don't take them as personally. Optimists expect problems to be just temporary. Pessimism derives from a deep-seated sense of helplessness. The pessimistic belief that "nothing I do matters" can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In laboratory experiments "learned helplessness" had nearly the same impact and fundamentally the same cause as full-blown depression: the belief that in the face of bad or uncontrollable events, individual action does not matter. Fortunately, people can unlearn learned helplessness. In fact, unlearning this habitual reaction seems to "inoculate" people against future helplessness. Optimism begets resilience; optimists succeed. By studying people who do not give up easily or who bounce back more quickly, researchers are realizing that resilience comes down to the explanations people give themselves when things go bad.

How You Talk to Yourself

Everyone suffers failures, but resilient people have a different reaction from those who descend into lasting depression. How personally do you take failure? How permanent do you believe it is? How pervasively does it affect your life? Pessimists tend to believe bad things happen to them as a result of permanent causes. A pessimist may say, "You never talk to me," generalizing a particular instance of adversity into a permanent characteristic.

"Look for the link between your beliefs and the consequences... Pessimistic explanations set off passivity and dejection, whereas optimistic explanations energize."

"When the skills of optimism are learned early, they become fundamental. Like the habits of cleanliness and kindness, they are so rewarding in themselves that practice is automatic rather than a burden."

“Ducking our disturbing beliefs can be good first aid, but a deeper, more lasting remedy is to dispute them: Give them a good argument. Go on the attack.”

“By effectively disputing the beliefs that follow adversity, you can change your customary reaction from dejection and giving up to activity and good cheer.”

“The epidemic of depression stems from the much-noted rise in individualism and the decline in the commitment to the common good.”

“The consequence of preoccupation with our own successes and failures, and lack of serious commitment to the commons is increased depression, poor health and lives without meaning.”

By contrast, an optimist says, “You haven’t talked to me lately,” isolating a troubling event and not extrapolating it into a permanent explanation. Pessimists frequently use “always” and “never” to explain setbacks and trouble.

People with an optimistic explanatory style find that good events are caused by permanent conditions, and that bad events are the result of temporary factors. An optimistic lottery winner might say, “I’m always lucky,” rather than “It’s my lucky day.” Permanent explanations for the causes of adversity lead to helplessness; temporary explanations produce resilience. “Pervasiveness” refers to how you allow the explanations for one setback to become explanations across a range of situations. Pessimists tell themselves that bad events will undermine their whole lives. An optimist believes good things result from pervasive reasons, while setbacks are related only to short-term circumstances.

“Personalization” is an aspect of the explanatory style you use to account for bad events. Do you internalize (blame yourself) or externalize (blame others)? An internal blaming style can lead to low self-esteem. In this dimension, once again, the optimist internalizes good things and externalizes bad things, while the pessimist internalizes the bad and externalizes the good. Pessimistic explanatory styles turn moments of learned helplessness into full-blown depression, adding importance to the issue of hope and hopelessness. If you explain your failure to yourself pessimistically, you may then expect your future to be full of failure based on this one experience. Both drug and cognitive therapies relieve depression, but cognitive therapy gives you new ways to view old problems and to change your explanatory style. Cognitive therapy relieves depression more successfully and makes it less likely to return. It offers inoculation against future severe depression.

Women are twice as likely to be depressed as men, perhaps due to women’s often-deprecated role in society. Girls’ achievements frequently get far less attention than boys’ achievements. In general, females are raised to be passive. If women excel at work, often they are considered out of place. These factors produce learned helplessness and contribute to a pessimistic explanatory style. Women also tend to ruminate. Once depressed, they attempt to analyze what went wrong. Men resist dwelling on problems and, instead, distract themselves, which tends to break up depression. Rumination stokes depression, especially when it is combined with a pessimistic explanatory style.

Cognitive therapy can give you the skill to change how you talk to yourself when you fail. Thus, it works to prevent depression. It’s based on the finding that how you feel is determined largely by what you consciously think. Therapy’s goal is to change the patient’s conscious thoughts about helplessness, failure and loss.

Optimism for Pessimists

A gift is hidden within the pessimistic attitude: hardheaded realism. Sometimes an adverse situation calls for cutting your losses and moving on. Pessimists portray situations more accurately. Being too optimistic can hamper change because it’s less realistic. Excessive optimism can make you misjudge how much control you have in a given circumstance. Optimism is crucial in having the perseverance to see where your talent will lead you. However, pessimism is handy for assessing the future’s negative possibilities more accurately. For example, if your job involves determining the degree of safety in a situation, you may need a mild dose of pessimism to assess reality accurately. Pessimism breeds caution and the habit of looking at the other side of the coin. In a world of constant uncertainty, a tincture of pessimism might be crucial to foreseeing and thus avoiding potential disaster. But strike a balance; you do not need to let pessimistic thoughts pervade all areas of your life.

“The twin epidemics among young people... depression and violence (may) both come from... valuing how our young people feel about themselves more highly than we value how well they are doing.”

“Failure makes everyone at least momentarily helpless...but the hurt goes away – for some people almost instantly...For others, the hurt lasts; it seethes, it roils, it congeals into a grudge.”

“Explanatory style has a sweeping effect on the lives of adults. It can produce depression in response to everyday setbacks or produce resilience even in the face of tragedy.”

“Optimism matters because it produces persistence.”

Children absorb their explanatory styles primarily from their mothers and other adults, such as teachers, who criticize their failures. Children who experience a pessimistic style will learn it. A pessimistic explanatory style combined with negative life events (such as divorce or parental fighting) predict childhood depression. Cognitive therapy techniques can inoculate children against future depression by giving them ways to dispute their negative thoughts.

On the health front, experiments have shown a connection between learned helplessness and the inability to combat cancer. Learned helplessness and depression erode the effectiveness of the immune system. In fact, one study established that learned helplessness caused cancer. So how does optimism contribute to good health? First, optimism prevents helplessness, thus better preserving a strong immune system.

Optimists tend to take better care of their health. Their “can do” spirit keeps them going to the gym and sticking to a diet. People who accumulate bad life events tend to get worn down and turn optimism to pessimism. Unsurprisingly, pessimists tend to experience more negative events, launching a self-fulfilling prophecy of lowered expectations. Because pessimists tend to give up during setbacks, they don’t seek help or social support. They isolate themselves and become passive, giving bad events the opportunity to overwhelm them. Depression actually lowers immune activity.

Those pessimists who want to maintain their more accurate picture of reality and yet reap the benefits of hopefulness should cultivate “flexible optimism,” as opposed to blind optimism. The idea is to change the way you explain bad events to yourself, to offer arguments against absorbing all the personal blame for setbacks, and to limit adversity’s impact on your time and on different areas of your life. You need optimism if you’re trying to achieve a goal, keep your morale high, maintain a healthy immune system or lead others.

However, it is not appropriate to try to minimize someone’s potential damage in a high-stakes or dangerous situation. If you want to show sympathy for someone’s hardship, optimism can seem superficial. A better time to show optimism is after you have established a bond.

Learn Your “ABC’s”

Use the ABC (the acronym stands for adversity, beliefs and consequences) technique to think about the chain of cognition. Adversity sets a cognitive explanatory cycle in motion, quickly solidifying thoughts into beliefs that generate your feelings and responses. The way you explain the setback to yourself – not the event itself – determines if you respond by acting constructively or if you fall into despair.

To interrupt the depression-brewing cycle sparked by negative self-explanation, first become conscious of your thoughts about adversity. When you face adversity, see what consequences your thoughts provoke. Are you inclined to take action or give up? Practice the ABC method by writing down all the sequences of this kind that you notice over two days.

To break the cycle and begin to change the thoughts you have following adversity, distract yourself by thinking of something else or arguing against the negative thoughts. To divert your attention, combine a physical ritual (snap a rubber band on your wrist or slap the table) with the mental act of arresting your negative or ruminating thoughts. Distraction will immediately refocus your attention. You can also render negative thoughts less potent by writing them down and scheduling a time to evaluate them later.

“People who have a pessimistic explanatory style and suffer bad events will probably become depressed, whereas people who have an optimistic explanatory style and suffer bad events will tend to resist depression.”

“Many children suffer terribly from pessimism, a condition that torments them through the years...pessimism embeds itself as a way of looking at the world, and childhood pessimism is the father and mother of adult pessimism.”

“In the classroom and...the playing field, success will not necessarily go to the most talented. The prize will go to the adequately talented who are also optimists.”

Better yet, argue against your entrenched thoughts, which can also make them recur less frequently. Unchallenged negative thoughts are draining and debilitating, but disputing them is energizing. To reframe your perspective, distance yourself from habitual negative thoughts and dispassionately analyze their accuracy.

Construct a persuasive argument based on facts, not on trite, unfounded “feel good” notions with no emotional resonance. When you consider the reason that something adverse has happened, do not latch onto the most awful cause you can imagine. Instead, substitute alternative causes that are changeable, specific and impersonal. Use real evidence. Analyze the implications of your thoughts to make them less catastrophic.

Even if your beliefs are based on truth, decide if holding them is destructive. To change entrenched negative reactions to adversity, change “ABC” to “ABCDE” – add disputation and energization. When you vigorously dispute negative beliefs, you’ll feel a new energy, an impulse toward constructive action. Dispute your thoughts after even minor adverse events and record what happens. As you practice disputing entrenched thoughts, you’ll get better at recognizing them, arresting negative patterns and changing your explanatory style.

Only you can decide when it is best to cultivate an optimistic viewpoint or when you might need a dose of pessimism to shape a more conservative assessment of reality. Once you learn the techniques, you can choose to dispute pessimistic thoughts or use them as evaluative tools.

The Societal Perspective: More “Me” and Less “Us”

Today’s youth are ten times more likely than their grandparents to suffer depression. Why? One answer is that U.S. culture has encouraged people to think about themselves more than they think about others. To the good, this belief in self-efficacy does enable self-help, since people feel empowered to make internal change, but it also leads to a greater expectation and demand for personal control. Spurred by advertisements that offer overwhelming marketplace choices, the individual’s sense of internal wealth becomes linked to his or her degree of consumption. At the same time, the sense of community and commonality is shrinking.

Perhaps worn down in the ‘60s and ‘70s by the assassinations of visionary leaders, the Vietnam War and Watergate, the general commitment to positive change via public service has eroded. People turned away from their communities, as the priority placed on family and spiritual beliefs eroded in the face of self-absorption. People who lack a sense of God, a nation or a family to turn to for support and renewal are left with only themselves. With no sense of commitment to larger issues, the lone self is easy prey to depression and blame. To reverse this trend, individuals must decide to invest some attention and passion in rebuilding the common good. Parents can begin by imbuing their children with hope for a positive future. To protect them from depression and pessimism, give them an optimistic foundation.

About The Author

Martin E. P. Seligman, Ph.D. is a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania and past president of the American Psychological Association. He is a pioneer in the field of positive psychology and the author of *Authentic Happiness* and *The Optimistic Child*.