

# Optimism and Attributional Style

Numerous studies have been conducted on **optimism** and **pessimism**. This research has identified two different types of optimism/pessimism; one is a general disposition (e.g. a belief that your life will turn out well) and the other relates to attributional style (e.g. a pessimist may be more inclined to blame himself for bad events).

One particular study by Dr. Martin Seligman (the founder of Positive Psychology) and colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania described the characteristics of individuals showing **optimistic** and **pessimistic attributional** styles. According to this study.....

- **The pessimist** will tend to blame themselves for the bad things that happen to them (*personalisation*), believing that the effects will last for a long time (*permanence*) and that the bad events will impact many aspects of their lives (*pervasiveness*). This pattern of thinking or *attributional style* can be summarised as 'It's me, it's going to last forever, and it's going to affect everything I do'. This pattern of thinking has also been described as *catastrophizing*. When a pessimist experiences failure of some kind the response might be 'I always knew I was stupid, and this proves it; I can never do anything right'. This is an extreme form of pessimism.
- **The Optimist**, on the other hand, experiencing the same event would see it quite differently. People who are optimists tend not to blame themselves for the bad event. They tend to believe that bad events are limited both in time and in the extent to which they will cause damage or have negative consequences. In other words they focus in on the *specific consequences* of the event and do not make sweeping global generalisations that blow the event out of proportion. An example of this might be 'Well, that didn't work out, but I'll figure out how to do it better and next time I'm sure it'll work.'

Optimism has been associated with greater academic, sporting and career achievements. In the context of health and well-being, optimism has been associated with greater resilience to stressful situations and major life events (such as bereavement or a serious illness in the family).

Optimism is good because it provides the motivation for change. But remember even optimists have to do the work. So having made the decision that you want to lose weight, for example, it is important to set realistic goals and develop a realistic plan and not simply leave success to wishful thinking. This is the difference between being an **attentive optimist** and an **undiluted optimist**; someone who takes an appropriate level of responsibility for their actions and their success, rather than blaming others and avoiding doing the hard work.

# Building Optimism

## Framing and Re-framing

The way we interpret events often reflects our underlying beliefs. Changing our interpretation can help change our beliefs, such as pessimism. One way to do this is to practice the simple art of re-framing – also referred to as positive re-interpretation.

The interpretation or perspective we take of a situation can be described as a *'frame'*. When we change the frame around something we can change the meaning we give it. By re-framing, or looking at things from a different perspective, we can challenge our pessimistic beliefs, we can see the good that can come from seemingly unpleasant experiences, and we can even make jokes about adversity.

This is an example of an emotion-focused coping strategy that can also help build more positive beliefs, about ourselves and the world. The reason a friend or therapist's help is so invaluable sometimes is because they can help us take a different perspective on these things. This is a re-frame.

### Framing and re-framing

- Allows you to alter your perspective
- You gain more information about a situation
- Gives you more choices (i.e. expands and enriches your perceptual map)
- More choices gives you more and better options and so greater flexibility
- More flexibility gives you the power to adapt and so be more resilient

## The Frame Game – Exercise

Think of a project or a goal you are currently working on, or planning to work on in the future.

1. What are some of the frames you could put around this project that would reduce your motivation to work hard on it?

### **Examples**

*'This is an experiment in failure'*

*'Even it works, nothing good will come from it'*

*'This is just the latest management fad'*

*'I don't see how this is going to help us achieve our overall objective'*

2. What frames could you put around the project that would increase your interest in taking part and making it happen?

### **Examples**

*'Whatever the outcome I will have learnt some useful skills along the way'*

*'I've got all the skills I need to make a success of this project and it's an opportunity to raise my profile'*

*'I've got a good opportunity to show management what I'm capable of, if I make a success of this project I'll have more influence in planning the next one.'*

## 1. Negative frame

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## 2. Positive frame

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Adopting positive frames is particularly useful at times when we perceive to have ‘failed’ at something, e.g. not passing an exam. It can also be useful for boosting your interest and motivation at work. When faced with difficulties. Take time out to actively look at the different frame.

**NOTE:** It’s very important that the positive frame is realistic and believable. Re-framing is not about Pollyanna thinking. It’s about finding a positive perspective that is true and meaningful.

## The Best Possible Selves Diary

This is another way to help build optimism.

- Imagine yourself in the future, after everything has gone as well as it possibly could. You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all your life goals. Think of this as the realisation of your life's dreams, when you have reached your full potential
- Write down what has happened in each major area of your life ... e.g. career, family/home-life, leisure
- Continue writing over the next few weeks, as often and for as long as you wish

This diary technique has been shown to increase optimism.

### Best Possible Self Diary