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Lemons to Lemonade: How Learned Optimism Works

by Rita Milios

In a recent counseling session, “Bob” spent most of the hour venting his frustrations about various setbacks and blaming others for his troubles. Then, when our time was nearly up, he asked, “Do you think I’m being too negative? I’ve just always hated that saying, ‘When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.’ To me it seems too Pollyannaish. But maybe I could use a little more of that ... What do you think?”

I’ve just always hated that saying, ‘When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.’—*Bob*

Pleased that Bob had finally turned the conversation toward what he might do to improve his situation, rather than just complaining about it, I told him that, yes, I did, indeed, think that he could use a little more positivity in his attitude. But far from being “Pollyannaish,” having a positive outlook is actually a well-known psychological tool for assisting one in the face of adversity.

The way we think and how we talk to ourselves largely dictates how we feel about the circumstances we encounter—whether we perceive ourselves as helpless and hopeless or as confident and capable of success.

Are You an Optimist or a Pessimist?

Bob, with his focus locked on the negative aspects of his situations, was acting like a poster boy for pessimists. He was exhibiting what psychologist Martin Seligman, Ph.D., professor at the University of Pennsylvania and director of The Positive Psychology Center, calls a *negative explanatory style*.

Explanatory style is the way in which a person tends to explain situations to him or herself— either with a negative spin, as Bob was doing, or with a positive spin, as people we call optimists do. Since circumstances are really emotionally neutral in their own right (we add the interpretation or meaning to them, to designate them in our minds as positive or negative), we, therefore, control how we perceive our life circumstances.

Take a look at the two sets of questions below. Which statements seem more like the explanatory style that you use to interpret situations in your life?

I rarely count on good things happening to me.
If something can go wrong for me, it will.
I hardly ever expect things to go my way.

In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.
I'm always hopeful about my future.
Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad.

If you often use statements like those in the first set, you are more likely to have a *negative explanatory style*, that of a pessimist. If your mottos more closely resemble statements from the second set, you likely have a positive explanatory style, and think more like an optimist. Having a positive explanatory style generally leads to greater happiness and success. And the good news is that thinking more optimistically is something that you can learn to do.

How Did You Get This Way? What Can You Do About It?

In his book, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* (Random House Books, NY, 1990; revised 1998, 2006), Seligman describes three basic differences between pessimists and optimists:

- Pessimists tend to believe that the bad events that happen to them are permanent, not transitory. They often feel that the negativity from such events will forever affect their lives. This leads to a sense of helplessness regarding their ability to better their situation. Optimists, on the other hand, view setbacks as temporary. They are therefore more resilient and bounce back from adversity, rather than letting it sideline them.
- Pessimists attribute success to specific and/or unusual circumstances (random chance, a particular opportunity that is not likely to be repeated), and expect failure as the norm. Optimists view success as an expected outcome, due to their overall competence or abilities.
- Pessimists experience low self-esteem in the face of adversity or setbacks. They blame themselves and feel worthless or talentless. Optimists don't allow unfortunate circumstances to alter their overall positive view of themselves and their capabilities. They can more easily separate their self-worth from the outcome of a particular situation.

Doesn't it make sense to work to gain a more positive outlook if you currently have a pessimistic attitude? Learned Optimism validates the possibility that you can change your life for the better, through your own effort and will. Learned Optimism is empowering and self-motivating. And it is a choice. Try the technique below and see for yourself how you can learn to be more optimistic about yourself and your life.

Seligman's ABCDE Method for Learned Optimism

Seligman's A, B, C, D, E model starts with A for adversity. When we experience setbacks or adversity, we react by thinking about it. Our thoughts are processed according to our beliefs (B). These beliefs lead to consequences (C) that are usually negative if we are thinking pessimistically and have negative expectations. But if we use D, disputation, we can mentally challenge our pessimistic beliefs and look for evidence to dispute them. Finally, E is for energization (or motivation), which we feel after we've disputed our false, negative beliefs.

According to Seligman, the key to dealing with setbacks is learning how to dispute those initial, automatic, negative thoughts. There are two ways to do this. The first is to distract yourself when the automatic, negative thoughts occur—force yourself to think of something else. The second is to dispute these negative thoughts and beliefs, and not automatically accept them as truth.

Challenging and Disputing Automatic Negative Thoughts

In my counseling practice, I teach clients that the problem is not really that they have automatic, negative thoughts and their related issues (low self-esteem, etc.). During childhood, almost all of us get “hardwired” into our brains with mistaken, negative beliefs about ourselves. This is so common that I often use the phrase, “If you are breathing, you have issues.” Such beliefs and issues only become a problem because most of us never check our “default settings” for truth, so we fail to dispute our negative programming.

Remember: Feelings are not facts, and automatic thoughts don’t automatically hold truth!