

THE BIG IDEAS

Cognitive Therapy
vs. Behaviorism.

Optimism
vs. Positive thinking.

Learned Helplessness
Dogs, depression and you.

Explanatory Styles
Where it's at.

The Three P's
Permanence, pervasiveness,
personalisation.

Cool Studies
Met Life, Biondi, the NBA.

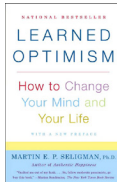
Why Optimism?
Health, performance, etc.

Become Optimistic
Question auto-responses.

Commit
To your world.

*"yes is a world & in this
world of yes live (skillfully
curled) all worlds"*

~ e. e. cummings
"love is a place"
No Thanks (1935)



Learned Optimism

How to Change Your Mind and Your Life

BY MARTIN SELIGMAN · VINTAGE © 2006 · 336 PAGES

"Habits of thinking need not be forever. One of the most significant findings in psychology in the last twenty years is that individuals can choose the way they think."

~ Martin Seligman from *Learned Optimism*

"I can 'learn' optimism?!?"

Yep, according to psychologist [Dr. Martin Seligman](#), you sure can.

And, if you believe the research, you definitely should!

We all know that optimists see the glass as half-full while pessimists see it as half-empty. But, that doesn't come close to doing justice to the importance of optimism and how it affects our lives.

[Martin Seligman](#), past President of the APA, visionary behind the Positive Psychology movement and one of the leading psychologists in the world, has spent the last three and a half decades researching the influence of optimism on our lives. Much of his work is presented in his book [Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life](#).

In this Note, we'll take a quick look at the underlying theories of optimism, talk about some cool applications (such as: optimistic professionals sell more and optimistic sports teams win more), and talk about how you can improve your optimism.

Hope you enjoy!

COGNITIVE THERAPY VS. BEHAVIORISM

Let's start with a quick history lesson in psychology.

It wasn't *too* long ago that the field of psychology was dominated by B. F. Skinner and his lineage that believed EVERYTHING was a result of how we were conditioned.

In fact, when Seligman and his colleagues first presented the idea (around 1965) that we could learn new cognitive strategies that would result in different behaviors, the old school behaviorists thought that was blasphemy.

Now, of course, we know that cognitive therapy DOES work.

And, the "explanatory style" lessons we'll explore in this Note form a critical part of this work.

OPTIMISM VS. POSITIVE THINKING

"Learned optimism is not a rediscovery of the 'power of positive thinking.' ... Changing the destructive things you say to yourself when you experience the setbacks that life deals all of us is the central skill of optimism."

From a scientific perspective, "optimism" does not equal positive thinking.

“Pessimists can in fact learn to be optimists, and not through the mindless devices like whistling a happy tune of mouthing platitudes (‘Every day, in every way, I’m getting better and better’), but by learning a new set of cognitive skills.”

It’s all about the way you interpret something that happens to you.

How you think about a positive or negative event determines quite a bit. We’re going to go into more detail about optimism, what it is, how it’s been proven to be a good thing, and how you can increase your level of optimism.

We’ll start with a quick look at Learned Helplessness and then look at the mechanics of optimism:

“People who make permanent and universal explanations for their troubles tend to collapse under pressure, both for a long time and across situations.”
~ Martin Seligman

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

“Learned helplessness is the giving up reaction, the quitting response that follows from the belief that whatever you do doesn’t matter. *Explanatory style* is the manner in which you habitually explain to yourself why events happen. It is the great modulator of learned helplessness. An optimistic explanatory style stops helplessness, whereas a pessimistic explanatory style spreads helplessness.”

Learned helplessness.

I first learned about this as an undergraduate psychology student at UCLA. The theory was developed by Seligman and his colleagues in their work with dogs.

(As an animal lover, I appreciated Seligman’s comments on the ethics of his use of animals in his experiments and his commitment to their well-being in the context of striving to learn lessons he could apply to humans.)

Imagine two dogs: The first dog is slightly shocked but has a lever he can push that will stop the shocks. He quickly learns to stop the shocks. He’s in good “psychological” shape. A second dog does not have a lever. He can’t stop the shocks. Rather, the shocks stop whenever the *first dog* hits *his* lever. So, in effect, the shocks are random. Our second dog “learns” that he is helpless in the face of these shocks.

Here’s what’s fascinating: The dogs are then moved to a new area and taught a new way to avoid the shocks. So, now they can BOTH avoid the shocks at will. Remarkably, although the first dog avoids the shocks, the second dog curls up in the corner and whimpers as the shock—which *he could have avoided*—is administered. He’s learned helplessness.

So, how does this apply to humans?

In short, we “learn” helplessness when we believe that nothing we do will change our circumstances and then, effectively, give up.

This learned helplessness is one of the strongest correlates of depression.

The solution? We need to change our explanatory styles.

EXPLANATORY STYLES

We are constantly talking to ourselves. Let’s call that our internal dialogue.

Imagine something bad happens—whether it’s losing your job, or getting in an argument with a friend or spouse. How do you tend to respond? What’s your internal dialogue?

Some people, the ones who tend to give up easily, habitually say things like: *“It’s my fault, it’s going to last forever, and it’s going to undermine everything I do.”*

Others, who are less likely to give in to the tough times, say: *“The outcome was out of my*

"On a mechanical level, cognitive therapy works because it changes explanatory style from pessimistic to optimistic, and the change is permanent. It gives you a set of cognitive skills for talking to yourself when you fail."

~ Martin Seligman

control, it's only temporary and, besides, it's only one part of my life."

We are always interpreting different events—both positive and negative. Seligman calls the way we interpret these events our explanatory style.

He has identified three primary elements of our explanatory style: **permanence, pervasiveness, and personalization.** Your current tendencies dictate your level of optimism.

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(If you'd like to test your optimism, check out the book or go to AuthenticHappiness.com today!)

THE THREE P'S

"There are three crucial dimensions to your explanatory style: permanence, pervasiveness, and personalization."

Permanence: Is it likely to continue? Is it permanent or temporary?

The permanence is pretty straightforward. Something happens. Do you explain the results as permanent, and likely to recur? Or, do you think it was temporary—just a fluke.

If it's a bad thing, the optimist tends to think it's a fluke. If it's a good thing, they tend to think it's permanent.

The opposite holds true for the pessimist: Good things are the flukes and bad things are more likely to recur.

Pervasiveness: Is it reflective of your whole life? Is it "universal" or is it "specific"?

The pervasiveness looks at whether we believe an event is specific or universal. So, do we think the results of this one event apply to everything in our lives, or just that episode?

With a good event, the optimist is more likely to extend it to her whole life. With a bad event, she will tend to isolate the incident as specific to that situation.

The opposite holds true for the pessimist. If something good happens, they think it was a fluke. If something bad happens, they think it is representative of their whole life.

Personalization: Internal or external?

The personalization looks at whether we believe that we are responsible for the event, or if something outside of our control was responsible. The fancy psychological term for it is "locus of control": whether you believe the control was "internal" or "external."

Something good happens. An optimist pats himself on the back (internal)—saying he did a good job. Same thing happens to a pessimist. He is more likely to attribute the success to luck, other people's hard work, or something else outside of his control (external).

D'oh. Something bad happens. The optimist looks to things outside of himself (external) to explain the event—from bad luck to an off day. The pessimist, although they didn't take responsibility for the good event, are eager to take responsibility for the bad event (internal).

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A note on realism: Seligman addresses the fact that optimism is not always a good thing.

In fact, many situations call for a strong level of pessimism and realism. For example, imagine a pilot experiencing trouble with his aircraft. The situation demands brutal realism. Same holds true for a business experiencing troubles.

Although you want your leader to have hope and optimism for a bright future, you also need a healthy dose of realism to ensure success.

"Practice disputing your automatic interpretations all the time from now on."

~ Martin Seligman

COOL STUDIES

Seligman provides a range of interesting studies that support his theories.

Let's check out a few here:

MET LIFE

What does Met Life have to do with optimism? Quite a bit. Met Life was one of the first organizations to work with Seligman to apply his theories to the working world. And the company did so with great success.

Met Life (and all insurance companies, and many businesses for that matter) pay a lot of money to screen their candidates. Seligman believes that optimism is an important variable to look out for, and that this characteristic ties directly to the bottom line.

We'll begin with traditional hiring wisdom that "holds that there are two ingredients of success... the first is ability or aptitude, and IQ tests and SAT are supposed to measure it. The second is desire or motivation. No matter how much aptitude you have, says traditional wisdom, if you lack desire you will fail. Enough desire can make up for meager talent."

Seligman continues: "I believe that traditional wisdom is incomplete. A composer can have all the talent of Mozart and a passionate desire to succeed, but if he believes he cannot compose music, he will come to nothing. He will not try hard enough. He will give up too soon when the elusive right melody takes too long to materialize.

Success requires persistence, the ability to not give up in the face of failure. I believe that optimistic explanatory style is the key to persistence."

And: "The explanatory-style theory of success says that in order to choose people for success in a challenging job, you need to select for three characteristics:

1. aptitude
2. motivation
3. optimism"

Seligman took this theory to Met Life and tested it out. What did he find?

In short, he found that insurance agents who scored in the less optimistic half of his test were twice as likely to quit as agents who scored in the more optimistic half. Further, the agents from the top quarter sold 50% more than the agents from the bottom quarter.

MATT BIONDI

Do you remember Matt Biondi?

He was the greatest swimmer of his era and one of the most victorious Olympians of all time.

He also happened to be a subject in one of Seligman's research studies—an incredibly optimistic subject, in fact.

During the 1998 Seoul Olympics, Biondi was expected to bring home gold in all seven of his events. His first two events were a disappointment—he received bronze and silver.

Seligman tells a story about how he was watching the events at home, listening to the announcers ponder whether Biondi would rebound well following his two disappointments.

Seligman says: "I sat in my living room confident he would."

Why?

*"Hope` is the thing with
feathers- That perches in
the soul- And signs the
tune without the words-And
never stops-- at all--"*

~ Emily Dickinson

No. 254 (c. 1861)

"Because his explanatory style was highly optimistic and he had shown us that he got faster—not slower—after defeat."

How'd he do?

In the last five events in Seoul, Biondi won five gold medals.

Hiring Tip: "Optimism tells you who to select and recruit. If two prospects are close in raw talent, recruit the optimist. He'll do better in the long run."

THE NBA

Seligman took his theories to the sports arena and found some fascinating results.

His question: Could a sports team be optimistic or pessimistic? How would this affect its performance?

His study: He focused on the Atlantic Division of the NBA. Holding other variables constant, his research team scientifically analyzed quotes from players and coaches to measure their level of optimism or pessimism following either a win or a loss.

His findings: Teams, and not just individuals, have a meaningful and measurable explanatory style. Following a loss, an optimistic team was much more likely to beat the spread. A team's explanatory style for bad events strongly predicts how they do against a point spread after a loss.

In his study, the Celtics were the quintessential optimists—always explaining away a bad loss as temporary, specific, and not their fault. They were an uncanny comeback team. Language they used: *"They were making good, quick cuts to the basket."* And: *"That's the best I've ever seen a team run."*

The Nets, on the other hand, were mentally shipwrecked. They explained losses as permanent, pervasive, and their own fault: *"We botched up things ourselves and blew all our opportunities."* And: *"This is one of the physically weakest teams I've ever coached."*

Tip: Don't bet against an optimistic team that just lost!! :)

WHY YOU WANT TO BE OPTIMISTIC

"Life inflicts the same setbacks and tragedies on the optimist as on the pessimist, but the optimist weathers them better."

So, why should we care about optimism?

Well, we've seen how it affects performance professionally and personally.

And, as Seligman points out, research has revealed that optimism plays a significant role on our overall health—from different rates of cancer to overall immune functioning. (Plus, if you ever plan to run for President, you should know that Americans like optimists. :)

In sum: It makes sense to be optimistic.

BECOME MORE OPTIMISTIC

"Unlike dieting, learned optimism is easy to maintain once you start. Once you get into the habit of disputing negative beliefs, your daily life will run much better, and you will feel much happier."

OK, so now you can see the significance of adopting a more optimistic personality. (I hope!)

And, you've learned the importance of paying attention to how you're responding to negative events.

Want to master this lesson in “Learned Optimism”?

As you know, we’re constantly talking to ourselves. So, the next time you find yourself anxious or worried, pause for a moment and pay attention to what you’re saying to yourself. We tend to have automatic responses to different situations. We need to develop awareness of those automatic responses, and then develop new, more effective ways to interpret life’s events.

The bottom line is pretty straight forward: Start paying attention to your internal dialogue, notice the patterns, and try to optimize your three P’s.

Create new habits. Get momentum. The results will be exciting.

COMMIT TO SOMETHING BIGGER THAN YOURSELF

“The life committed to nothing larger than itself is a meager life indeed. Human beings require a context of meaning and of hope.”

In his concluding chapter, Seligman states that the epidemic of individualism in our culture today is a strong contributor to our depression. He mentions a study in which researchers were unable to find a case of depression in the Stone Age Kaluli tribesmen of New Guinea. The suggested explanation? The connection among the members of tribe were so close that helplessness did not escalate to hopelessness.

How about you? Are you committed to something bigger than yourself? How can you deepen your connection to your world today?

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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About the Author of “Learned Optimism”

MARTIN SELIGMAN



Martin E.P. Seligman is an American psychologist and writer. He is well known for his work on the idea of “learned helplessness,” and more recently, for his contributions to leadership in the field of Positive Psychology. He is the Robert A. Fox Leadership Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, Department of Psychology. He has served as President of the American Psychological Association (APA) and is a best selling author, writing about Positive Psychology topics such as *The Optimistic Child*, *Learned Optimism*, *What You Can Change and What You Can’t*. (adapted from Wikipedia) Learn more at **AuthenticHappiness.com**. Go to Seligman’s Research Alliance web site where you can get more info on the scientific research currently conducted at **PositivePsychology.org**.

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.