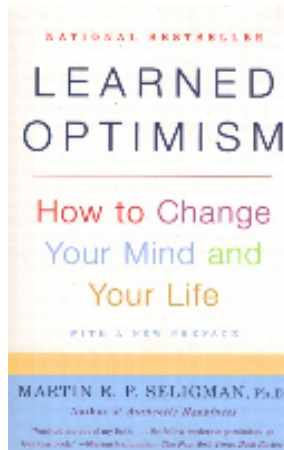




Learned Optimism by Martin E.P. Seligman

Introduction



In this book the author helps us to explore the way we interpret the events in our lives and understand the effects these interpretations will have. We realise that we can choose to look at our setbacks in a new light.

At the core of pessimism is a feeling of helplessness. That nothing we do will make a difference. It is true that there are many things outside of our control such as the weather, our shoe size or the day taxes are due. Equally there are also many things within our control such as what we eat for dinner or what clothes we decide to wear.

But there is also a vast unclaimed territory that we can choose to take or relinquish control to other people or to fate. Our choices will affect the actions we take, the way we interact with others, how we make a living etc. This book helps us make the right choices.

Benefits of Optimism

Hundreds of studies have shown the impact of being an optimist or a pessimist. For example Optimists tend to

- Do much better in school
- Exceed the predictions of aptitude tests
- Have greater success when they run for office
- Show greater persistence when looking to achieve goals
- Age better
- Usually experience better health and
- may even live longer.

Optimists do the opposite.

They believe

- that circumstances or bad luck or other people are responsible for bad events
- that the defeat experienced is temporary and that
- that the effects are limited to this specific area of their life.

At the core of pessimism is the feeling of helplessness. The feeling that you have no control of what happens to you. Optimists believe that you do have control.

However we need to understand that these habits of thinking are not written in stone. They are not ingrained within us. They have been learned throughout our lives and optimistic thinking can also be learned.

This was not always believed to be the case. One of the most significant discoveries in modern psychology in recent years is that people can choose the way they think.

Questionnaire

Your habitual ways of exploring bad events is learned from childhood and comes from your view of your place in the world e.g. whether you feel you are valuable or deserving or, on the other hand, worthless and hopeless.

This book comes with a "Explanatory Style" questionnaire. In it you are asked to explore your habitual ways of viewing the good and bad events in your life. It looks at 3 dimensions of your habitual thinking - permanence, pervasiveness and personalisation.

Permanence

This explores how long you feel the consequences of good or bad events will last. For example very optimistic people view good events as having permanent causes. When they occur they will often try even harder in the future. Pessimists often view these events or successes as simply a fluke and still give up.

Habits of Thinking

Optimism and Pessimism are habits of thinking. They could be described as your explanatory style. Pessimists habits of thinking about bad events are

- to blame themselves on bad events,
- to believe that these events will last a long time and
- that the consequences of these events will undermine everything they do.



Questionnaire (continued)

Pervasiveness.

This looks at the extent to which good and bad events impact on other areas of your life.

Some pessimists can create catastrophes of bad events and these then impact on other unconnected areas of their lives such as their work, health or key relationships. An optimist may get upset about this particular event but recognise that its' effects are limited and they do not allow it to impact on other areas

Personalisation.

This is the extent to which you blame yourself or others when bad events occur in your life and also whether you internalise or externalise good events that occur.

This is closely related to your self esteem levels. People who habitually blame themselves for the bad events in their lives have low self-esteem.

It should be stated however that personalisation can be over-rated in its' impact. A much more important element is your view of permanence. If you believe that the bad events that occur in your life have permanent causes then you are likely to believe that there is nothing you can do to change this and therefore you will not act to make the changes you need.

Word of Warning

Before going further the author offers a brief caveat when interpreting the extent to which we externalise the challenges we face.

Although many people blame themselves far too often for bad events that occur in their lives we need to ensure that we don't habitually externalise bad events.

Always blaming other people or circumstances for bad events can, in some cases, erode responsibility that we may have. Sometimes pessimism is appropriate.

We need to ensure we strike a balance. This will enable us to recognise when we need to take action to make the changes we require. Learned optimism is flexible optimism.

As mentioned previously the key element is permanence. If you want to change your view of permanence is the key

When to use Optimism

If learned optimism is flexible optimism we need to know when to use optimism and pessimism. The author gives us the following guidelines:

Optimistic Style

An optimistic explanatory style is very appropriate

- In an achievement situation
- If you are fighting off depression or trying to increase your morale
- If the situation could take a long time to resolve
- When you want to Inspire or lead others
- When the cost of failure is low – e.g. sales person making one final call.

Pessimistic Style

This is appropriate when

- Planning for a risky and uncertain future. You need to build contingencies – aim to hope for the best and plan for the worse
 - if you are trying to help someone who has suffered a major loss then don't rush into an optimistic style. This may be appropriate later on.
- When the cost of failure is high e.g. a pilot deciding whether to de-ice a plane or last time, or a party-goer deciding whether to drive home should not be take the optimistic viewpoint.

About the Author



Martin E.P. Seligman, Ph.D., has studied Optimists and Pessimists for over 25 years and is a leading authority on Motivation. He has received numerous honours and awards in his field. For example he is the recipient of two Distinguished Scientific Contribution awards from the American Psychological Association, the Laurel Award of the American Association for Applied Psychology and Prevention, and the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Society for Research in Psychopathology.

Since 2000 his main mission has been the promotion of the field of Positive Psychology. This discipline includes the study of positive emotion, positive character traits, and positive institutions. As the science behind these becomes more firmly grounded, Dr. Seligman is now turning his attention to training Positive Psychologists, individuals whose practice will make the world a happier place, in a way that parallels clinical psychologists having made the world a less unhappy place.



Learning Optimism

The ABC Model

The author introduces us to the ABC model to explain how the way we think about events affects our lives.

A = Adversity. We think about it and form a set of

B = Beliefs. We form a set of beliefs and these beliefs have

C = Consequences. The consequences are that they will affect the actions we take.

However these consequences are not inevitable. We can challenge the way we think about it. This will change our beliefs therefore the consequences of this particular adversity.

We should look to see how these ABCs impact our lives on a daily basis. Keep an ABC diary for a couple of days. Do this for 5 incidents in your life. Need to recognise the link between our thoughts and the subsequent actions we take.
Adversity e.g. unexpected bill or a baby that won't stop crying or an argument
Beliefs: The way you interpret the adversity. Don't log your feelings at this stage as these are the consequences of your beliefs.
Consequences. These are the actions you took and the feelings (anxious, guilt) you experienced. You will often experience a number of feelings.

You will find that pessimistic explanations lead to passivity and dejection. Optimistic explanations sets off constructive actions and increased energy. Becoming aware of the links between your beliefs and their consequences is the first step to changing your life.

So how do you change the way you think. There are 2 general ways referred to as Distraction and Disputation

Distraction

Distraction is where you think of something else when a negative thought or worry enters your mind.

There are some very specific and effective ways of doing this. If you want to redeploy your attention you can first use a thought stopping technique. You could decide to slam the table in front of you and shout stop. This will immediately stop your negative thoughts but may not be practical in the situation you are in.

Some people have an elastic band around their wrist and they snap it when they find themselves ruminating about some negative situation. Others carry a small card with the word STOP written on it.

These thought stopping techniques can be very effective when combined with attention shifting exercises to stop you going back to the negative thoughts.

For example after you have snapped the elastic band pick up a small object nearby (e.g. a pencil) and study it intensely. Notice it's shape, what it is made of, think about it's various uses and so on. This will help to completely shift your attention from your negative thought pattern. If you find yourself going back to the negative thoughts repeat the process again, using a different object.

Another very effective technique is to short circuit your thought process.

These ruminations exist as we are trying to figure out what it means and what action we are going to take.

Decide to yourself that you are going to schedule in some time to think about this particular problem – say 7 p.m. that night. If you also write down your main thoughts or concerns this completely reduces the strength of these ruminations. It helps to ventilate your thoughts and dispose of them. You have removed the reason these thought exist.

Disputation

This is where you learn to argue with yourself and to successfully dispute your interpretations of the events that have occurred. While distraction is good first aid when dealing with negative thoughts, disputation is really much more effective in eliminating these thoughts.

One example used in the book is a mature student over 40 who is disappointed with her grades during the year.

Her initial reaction was to tell herself that they were terrible grades, that it was too late to start a course like this. She was too old. And that she wouldn't get a job anyway at the end of the programme.

As a result she felt useless, embarrassed and wanted to withdraw from the course.



Disputation (continued)

Then she decided to dispute her interpretations. Firstly she argued that her grades were not that bad at all. She may not have been the best in the class but she wasn't the worst either. And the reason she did not do as well as she had hoped had nothing to do with her age.

Unlike others on the programme she had a full-time job and a husband and 2 kids. She decided that these grades gave her an idea of how much she needed to study in order to get the type of grades she wanted.

As a result of this disputation and her new way of thinking about the grades she had received she felt much better. She decided not to withdraw from the course and to concentrate on getting better grades. Although she was still a little concerned that she may be too old to get a job at the end of the course she decided she would cross that bridge when she came to it.

When other people tell us negative things about ourselves we can be very good at disputing these accusations and distancing ourselves from them. However we are not so good at distancing ourselves from the accusations that come from within. In fact we often think that if we are saying these things about ourselves they must be true – wrong. They be just as baseless as the ravings of our jealous rivals.

They are only beliefs – if you believe you are inadequate it does not mean it is true. Stand back and learn to argue with yourself.

Effective Disputation

There are 4 elements of effective disputation. These are

1. Find **evidence** to counter your pessimistic beliefs. The best way to dispute a negative belief is to show that it is factually incorrect. Pessimistic reactions are usually over-reactions and therefore you usually have the facts on your side.
2. Find **alternative explanations** for your actions. Most events have many causes. Pessimists have the habit of latching onto the worst of all possible causes – the most pervasive, the most permanent and the most personal. Ask yourself is there any less destructive causes. Then focus on the most changeable, specific and non-personal explanations.
3. Explore the **implications** of your pessimistic beliefs. Where you believe that the facts are not on your side and that the beliefs you hold are true (e.g. the student in the above example was the oldest in her class we need to reconsider the implications of this belief. This is called de-catastrophising.
4. Examine the **usefulness** of these beliefs. Sometimes the consequences of holding a belief matter more than the true of that belief. A bomb disposal expert could suddenly think about the possibility of a bomb exploding and killing him. It is not useful to consider that belief at that particular time. In this situation distraction rather than disputation is a better technique.

The ABCDE Model

The author now extends the ABC model to an ABCDE model to put the effective disputation into practice where D stands for Disputation and the E stand for Energisation which is what occurs when we successfully dispute your pessimistic explanation.

During the next 5 adverse situations that arise in your life examine the negative belief or beliefs that this creates and note the consequences of these beliefs. Then dispute the beliefs using the model above and observe the energisation that occurs when you succeed in dealing with the negative beliefs.

Record this in your diary. Remember these adverse situations can be minor ones such as a phone call unreturned or someone cutting across you in traffic.

Externalisation of Voices

For those keen to perfect the disputation technique the author explains a technique that can be used called "externalisation of voices".

This is where you ask a friend to help you dispute a negative belief you may have about an adverse situation in your life.

Your friend effectively becomes your inner voice and berates you in the very way a inner voice does on a habitual basis. Our job is to dispute these arguments.

To do this make sure your friend is informed of the situation and encourage them to come back with new arguments.



Conclusion

Optimism is good for you. It is fun to use and what goes on in your head is far more pleasant. However it cannot on its' own cure all ills. Also there are times when it is not always the best strategy as it may help people to avoid responsibilities in some situations.

However pessimists must realise that they now have a choice. If they learn optimism they can choose its' benefits when less depression, more achievements or better health is their goal. Or they can choose not to use it when owning up or taking responsibility is called for. This is what the author calls "Flexible Optimism".

Flexible Optimism frees you to use tools to better achieve the goals you have set. It allows you to use the wisdom you have won by a lifetime of trials to better effect. The benefits of this type of Optimism are, the author believes, without limits.

Other Books by the Same Author

For those interested in other books from Martin Seligman we have included a small sample of his other works. We hope you enjoy them.

- **Authentic Happiness.**

In this book Seligman doesn't just preach the merits of happiness e.g., happy people are healthier, more productive and more contentedly married than their unhappy counterparts but he also presents brief tests and even an interactive Web site to help readers increase the happiness quotient in their own lives. Trying to fix weaknesses won't help, he says; rather, incorporating strengths such as humor, originality and generosity into everyday interactions with people is a better way to achieve happiness.

- **The Optimistic Child.**

In The Optimistic Child, the author offers parents, teachers, and coaches a well-validated program to prevent depression in children. In a thirty-year study, Seligman and his colleagues discovered the link between pessimism -- dwelling on the most catastrophic cause of any setback -- and depression. Seligman shows adults how to teach children the skills of optimism that can help them combat depression, achieve more on the playing field and at school, and improve their physical health

- **What You Can Change & What You Can't**

People who try to change their own troubling conditions often experience the frustration of mixed success, success followed by a relapse, or outright failure. To address this confusion, Martin Seligman has meticulously analyzed the most authoritative scientific research on treatments for alcoholism, anxiety, weight loss, anger, depression, and a range of phobias and obsessions to discover what is the most effective way to address each condition. He pinpoints the techniques and therapies that work best for each condition, discussing why they work and how you can use them to make long lasting change.

