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Explanatory Styles: How to Boost Optimism and Develop a Balanced Mindset

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Sharing is caring.

Is it more difficult to identify different shades of green or the difference between green and blue? If you chose the second task, I'm betting you weren't raised in the **Himba tribe** of northern Namibia.

This is because the Himba color naming system differs drastically from that in the English language.

According to a 2005 study from the University of Essex, this difference led to drastically different color perceptions between Himba and British children.

Himba children greatly excelled at naming similar shades of green when compared to English children of the same age.

Conversely, British children found it easier to distinguish between blue and green than their Himba counterparts (Adelson, 2005).

In other words, the difference in **language** changed the way children saw colors.

The idea that language and perception influence each other has led to some very interesting findings in the field of positive psychology. This is particularly evident in the research on "explanatory styles" of optimists and pessimists.

This article contains:

- **Resilience to Bounce Back**
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Resilience to Bounce Back

Consider this. In most elite sports the number one rankings are determined by points awarded for high placings over the year. With enough high finishes, it is technically possible to reach number one without actually winning a tournament.

The point is, for every tournament a top athlete wins there are plenty of times when they don't. So their real strength is in their ability to **bounce back** from defeat; to 'hang in there'. Without this ability, they would quit at the end of their first winning streak.

When was the last time life kicked you around, so to speak? A relationship breakup? A failed exam? Issues at work?

'Bouncing back' isn't just for elite athletes, it's for all of us.

In Martin Seligman's seminal book '**Learned Optimism**' he explains why optimists bounce back from failed exams, from divorce, from unemployment, from disability while pessimists give up easily (and are more prone to depression).

These differences are significant and far-reaching as **optimists are more successful** in almost all areas of human endeavors including relationships, business, general health, sport and academic success.

Explanatory Styles

Martin Seligman described explanatory style as

"the manner in which you habitually explain to yourself why events happen" (Seligman, 1990).

In other words, they are the little stories we tell ourselves to make sense of our life.

Your explanatory style is your usual (fixed) pattern for interpreting and explaining bad events to yourself. Importantly, the **explanatory styles** of pessimists versus optimists are easily distinguished- in three predictable ways (also known as the "3Ps".

- **Personalization:** relates to the perception of causality. Events are internally or externally caused:

Say you lose a tennis match. A pessimistic player will interpret the cause as **personal** ('I failed'). This contrasts with an optimist who allows for non-personal factors ('grass just isn't my surface').

- **Permanence:** relates to the perception of time. Events are perceived as permanent or temporary:

Pessimists interpret setbacks as **permanent** ('I'll never succeed at this level'). In contrast, an optimist sees the setback as only temporary ('I didn't prepare well this time/I had a cold').

- **Pervasiveness:** relates to the perception of space. Events are perceived as global or specific:

Pessimists see setbacks as all-pervasive ('nothing works out for me'). In contrast, the optimist sees the setback as narrowly contained or confined to one area of life ('I still have a life outside of playing tennis').

The Mechanics of Optimistic & Pessimistic Talk

The key to recognizing the type of explanatory styles lies in using the 3Ps to examine the way "good" or "bad" events are described. **Optimism** assumes that good things are permanent, pervasive and internal. Bad things are seen as temporary, specific and externally caused. Pessimism is the reverse of this logic, as shown in the table below (Peterson, 2006):

	Good Situation	Bad Situation
Optimist	• Permanent • Pervasive • Personal (internal)	• Temporary • Specific • External cause
Pessimist	• Temporary • Specific • External cause	• Permanent • Pervasive • Personal (internal)

How Explanatory Styles Exist in Daily Life

Consider two people, Bill and Ben, who both apply for a promotion at the flowerpot factory (a real world of sorts). Both are rejected.

Bill is a pessimist. He assumes, rightly or wrongly, that the reason he missed out is **personal** (I wasn't good enough), and/or **permanent** (I'll never get ahead), and/or **pervasive** (this ruins everything -what's the point of living).

With this explanatory style, Bill is at risk of giving up on himself, is less likely to try again and is also more **vulnerable to depression.**

In contrast, Ben is an optimist. Faced with the identical setback he assumes the cause is non-personal (the boss's nephew got it), and temporary (I had a hangover that day), and non-pervasive (this impacts my career, but not my relationship, my hobbies, my gym membership etc -life goes on).

Identifying your style

Martin Seligman's site **Authentic Happiness** provides a free optimism assessment test to measure your level of optimistic permanence, pervasiveness, and personalization. This allows you to recognize, and therefore change, your descriptions to become more optimistic.

Counseling and Coaching

Whether in a clinical or coaching setting the basic approach is the same. When **faced with loss or disappointment** we can all benefit from asking ourselves three important questions.

1. "Am I *really* to blame, or was it just bad luck, the situation, or other people?

2. "How long will it last; i.e., will it always be like this or will it pass?"

3. "What does this really affect in my life and what will remain unaffected?

Have the above questions tattooed on the palm of your hand (metaphorically speaking) and read them to yourself next time life kicks you around.

Adopting an explanatory style based on accuracy and self-compassion is better than habitual pessimism.

Tips on Explanatory Styles for Coaches

1. Have your clients complete a stress event inventory such as the **Holmes-Rahe-Life Events Inventory**

2. Discuss the past major changes or losses in your client's life as identified on the scale. The loses, the setbacks, the failures.

3. Using the **personal, permanent, pervasive** model, ask your client how they explained those negative events to themselves at the time.

 Examples of these questions are:

Personal- Did you blame yourself at the time – if so, in hindsight did that prove accurate?

Permanent- Did you assume it would last forever – if so, were those predictions accurate or did it pass?

Pervasive- Did you assume it would ruin everything in your life – if so, in hindsight was that accurate or did much of your life continued unaffected?

If it turns out your client has been making the same **pessimistic thinking** error/s across several experiences, you have just found the key to increasing their resilience.

If you can encourage them to review their explanatory style, to challenge their pessimistic 'default setting', not only have you neutralized the damaging impact of past setbacks, you are teaching them to be more resilient in the future.

Developing a Balanced Mindset

It may seem that these findings suggest that all situations should be approached optimistically. This could be that the misconception that positive psychology is focused only on positivity implies a bias to favor positive thinking.

In reality, positive psychology acknowledges "optimism can have costs if it is too unrealistic"(Peterson, 2000). Seligman also cautions individuals to avoid optimism if you are trying to plan for a risky or uncertain future (Seligman, 1990). This is because pessimism helps us maintain caution, prudence and analytic thinking (which are key components to effective decision-making).

The goal is not to become only optimistic and leave pessimism to the wayside. Instead, it is about choosing the type of explanatory style that will be most effective for a given situation.

About the Authors

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