



Optimism and Pessimism

Creative Wellbeing Workshops

If you're a naturally buoyant optimist, you might have been called Pollyanna or Positive Patrick. If your disposition is more cynical, it might be Pessimistic Peter or Doubting Debbie. Although most of us are pretty clear about which one we are—optimist or pessimist—it might be interesting to know how these two ways of seeing the world are understood in psychological terms.

Most of the differences between the two lie in attributional style—how we “explain” and interpret what is happening to and around us. This emerges in three areas. As you read through these characteristics, even if you identify with both styles of thinking, one will usually resonate more for you than the other.



- **Attribution:** When good things happen to optimists, they tend to believe that more will continue to come their way. When bad things happen to them, they see them as isolated, temporary, and impersonal. In other words, “It could have happened to anyone and it likely won’t happen again.” Pessimists tend to do the opposite. When something positive happens to them they believe it is a fluke, it will not last, and will likely not happen again. Whereas they believe that bad things will inevitably come their way and when they do they say, “You see, this always happens to me!”
- **Agency:** Optimists tend to believe they are the agents of positive change in their lives. Pessimists tend to believe that they are responsible for bad events but that factors outside of them control positive events.
- **Pathways:** When optimists run into obstacles, they tend to find alternate avenues to accomplish what they are trying to do. Pessimists tend to give up more easily when they run into barriers.

To the question whether I am a pessimist or an optimist, I answer that my knowledge is pessimistic, but my willing and hoping are optimistic. Albert Schiwetzer

Which is better?

There are benefits and drawbacks to both styles of thinking. Thinking more optimistically is correlated with higher levels of subjective wellbeing and positive impact on health. Optimists may be more hopeful, flexible, and consider more possibilities. However, being too optimistic can sometimes lead to poor judgment. Optimists may also be more complacent because “everything will be just fine” that they may not try as hard.

Some degree of pessimism is helpful. For example, pessimists are often more “realistic”—they tend to perceive things more accurately and therefore may be better prepared for unfavorable outcomes. Pessimists may also be more tenacious and determined. On the other hand, they may get stuck in negativity and therefore may not be as effective at making decisions. If we are frequently anxious, we worry too much, we feel discouraged about meeting our goals, and we feel stuck in negativity, it may be adversely affecting our lives.

The most important way to figure out if your explanatory style is helpful or problematic is to see if is helping you or keeping you from achieving what you are trying to accomplish in your life.

Regardless of which explanatory style we are more prone to, you want to manage yourself so that you are best equipped to cope with whatever comes your way. This includes all of the strategies that we normally recommend for maintaining and increasing wellbeing which naturally affect the way we are perceiving things: supportive relationships, self-care and self-awareness; expressing our stress when we are struggling, and having pleasant experiences that induce positive emotions and broaden our perceptions. (See below for links to handouts on those topics).



“Beyond each impenetrable expanse of thundercloud obscurity reigns a boundless canopy of brilliant sapphire blue.” Cara Fox

We can also cultivate more optimistic thinking by shifting how what we focus on and how we perceive what we are going through:

- 1) Identify and dispute self-defeating thoughts that recur when you encounter adversity: e.g., I always..., I never...,
- 2) Identify and dispute negative interpretations of other people’s action either towards you or in general: e.g., They always..., they never...
- 3) Adopting a growth mindset where you see mistakes and failure as useful input from your environment, feedback that can be used to revise your strategies, not evidence of our inadequacies.
- 4) When negative things happen ask:
 - Is this temporary?
 - If not, how can I make it better?
 - If I can’t make it better, what will help me cope with it the best?
 - What has helped me manage difficulties in the past?
- 5) When positive things happen ask:
 - What specific actions on my part contributed to this happening?
 - What about me in general made it happen?
 - Celebrate and savor it happening.
- 6) Try to identify what you can and cannot change in your life and focus your attention on the former.
- 7) Even when things are going badly, “attend to the good”. Notice what *is* functioning in the situation, in your life, and in the world.
- 8) If and when the time is right, try to find positive meaning in negative things that have happened to you. That does not mean that you have to celebrate the challenges you’ve faced, but try to extract something out of it that has made you stronger, more resilient, more appreciative of others, able to help others, etc.
- 9) Be gentle with yourself. If you are not naturally optimistic, recognize that it might take more effort for you to be so, but that you will be able to shift your thinking with practice.



Resources: (go to www.creativewellbeingworkshops.com to explore more resources)

- Optimism/Pessimism Questionnaire. <https://www.authenticchappiness.sas.upenn.edu/testcenter>
- The Upside of Your Downside. Robert Biswas-Diener & Todd Kashdan
- Resilience: Build Skills to Endure Hardship. <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/resilience/MH00078>
- Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your life. Martin Seligman.
- Positivity Ratio Barbara Fredrickson.
- Building Your Resilience. APA. <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx>
- Mindset: The New Psychology of Success, Carol Dweck
- [Self-Care Handout](#) Creative Wellbeing Workshop