

# **BUILDING POSITIVE OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH AND FAMILIES**

## **Learned Optimism Can Transform Your Life**

March 19, 2015, Linda Hendrikson

### **OPTIMISM: TAPPING INTO OUR OWN SELF-MOTIVATION**

An optimistic thinking style is a primary factor in long-term success in coping with stress. This is especially true in challenging or high adversity families where setbacks are imminent. Most people believe they are optimistic; however, when faced with misfortune, they often react in a negative or self-defeating manner. Think of optimism as a mental tool. With it you build resiliency, which acts as a wall between yourself and misfortune. The key to being optimistic is to remind yourself that setbacks are temporary, isolated events. The more temporary and specific the explanation, the more quickly you will bounce back following adversity. If you believe the cause of your mess is permanent and universal—stupidity, lack of talent, ugliness—you will not act to change it or improve yourself.

Expand your definition of optimism and gain insight to your explanatory style for *both* good and bad events.

#### **Personalization:**

When we experience setbacks in life, we can blame ourselves and take responsibility for the outcome (internalize) or blame others and place the responsibility on something or someone else (externalize). If we believe we are the cause of **all** our failures, we typically bare the blame for more than we should. We all want to be responsible individuals, but sometimes we are too hard on ourselves and take responsibility for things that actually have external causes. Over time, this can have a profound effect on our well-being, self-esteem, and motivation. In fact, always internalizing setbacks may make you less likely to recover following future setbacks. People who know when it is appropriate to take responsibility for their setbacks and when to externalize their failures tend to bounce back quicker following a negative event and are motivated to try again.

#### **Permanence:**

When we fail, we all become at least momentarily helpless. We typically feel lost and unsure of what to do. While we all experience negative setbacks, there is a difference in how we perceive the event. Some people view (pessimistically) their misfortune or failure as a permanent condition and others (optimistically) see it as **temporary state** that can quickly change. We know that no negative event will last forever; however, we often explain such setbacks in a way that reflects permanence. If you say to yourself that “things will never change” or I am an idiot” you may be looking at negative events as permanent fixtures in your life. Over time permanence can impact your desire/ability to make positive choices throughout the coping process. In fact, you are more likely not to try and/or give up following setbacks. If you believe that things will always stay the

same and no one will ever change, why would you do anything to change yourself? It is fine and even natural to think negatively, but the key to a successful transition is to see the negatives as *temporary*. The more temporary our negative thinking, the more quickly we will regain our balance.

### **Pervasiveness:**

Some people are able to put all their setbacks *into perspective*, while others allow one problem to spill over into everything. Pervasiveness determines how many areas of our life will be affected when we experience setbacks. When we make universal explanations for our failures, we see the setback as far reaching and may tell ourselves that everything will suffer because of it. On the other hand, if we make specific explanation for a failure only that part of our life is impacted. Rather than feeling like our entire life is a failure, we view the negative event as minor setback. With this less pervasive perception the more apt we are to view the setback as a “bump in the road” rather than “a road full of bumps.”

**Hope (for bad events):** If we view bad events as permanent and pervasive, we often have little hope that things will get better. We tend to give up rather quickly because we believe that our efforts to change the situation are useless. However, if we have hope, there is an internal belief that things will improve and that the bad event is only temporary. With hope, we are able to bounce back from negative life events and persevere despite personal and professional setbacks.

**Hope (for good events):** What do you tell yourself when you experience good fortune? Some of us pass it off as luck or give the credit to our co-workers and friends. When we experience good events we should try to explain these events as permanent and pervasive conditions. We want the good things in life to continue, so our explanatory style should reflect our responsibility for creating these enjoyable events. If we believe that we have some influence on our good fortune we are more likely to work harder to have that spill over in other areas.

### **Optimism:**

Think of optimism as a mental tool. With it we build resiliency, which acts as a wall between misfortune and ourselves. **The key to being optimistic is to view setbacks as temporary, isolated events.** The more temporary and specific the explanation we give ourselves regarding the setback, the more quickly we will bounce back. If we believe the setback is permanent and pervasive we are much less likely to be able to adapt well to the stress.

Reference: Seligman, M.E.P. (1998). *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*. New York: Pocket Books and Seligman, M.E.P. (2001). *Authentic Happiness*. New York: Free Press.

## **CHALLENGING YOUR THOUGHTS—INCREASE YOUR MOTIVATION TO CHANGE**

“The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind”—*William James*

What could you do or say to lessen the impact of *or* eliminate your negative messages?  
**Remember that the irritation, frustration, or anger that stems from your triggers is based on your idea of how things *should* be, so only *you* can do something to reduce your triggers.**

Watch your thoughts, they become words  
Watch your words, they become actions  
Watch your actions, they become habits  
Watch your habits, they become character  
Watch your character, it becomes your destiny  
Frank Outlaw

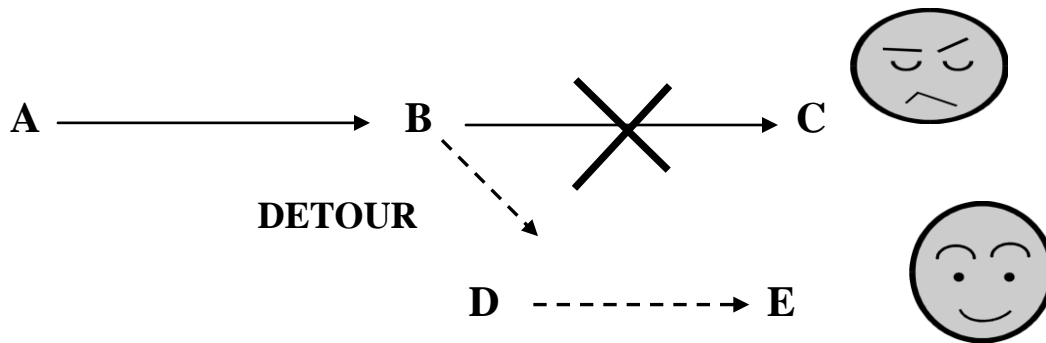
Thought—Word—vivid pictures—emotion—behavior, action, deed—self concept

*When you change what you believe, you change what you do!*

### **What the Bleep Do We Know?**

The film clip you are about to see demonstrates scientific impact on our thoughts and words. As you watch the clip, please note your reactions and the thoughts that come to mind.

## CHALLENGING YOUR THOUGHTS—INCREASE YOUR OPTMISM



**A** is the activating event (stressor) that sets you off. **B** is your belief or thought about the situation. **C** is the emotional or behavioral consequence of the stress. **D** is disputation you could choose to think or believe more positively and constructively. **E** is the energization you feel from this detour to become more hopeful and positive. Successful disputation leads to energization.

### Learning to Detour Around Your Old Thoughts: Questions to Consider

- Could there be other reasons for what happened?
- What assumptions do I make when this person or behavior triggers me?
- What keeps me from changing how I think about this trigger?
- What could I gain by changing my thoughts?

**Detour** around your old beliefs—learn to challenge and dispute your thoughts. What would make it less permanent, pervasive, and personal if the event is negative? *Next time you get triggered, what can you say to yourself that would challenge your old thoughts and beliefs?*

You can **Experience** positive changes. Challenge your thoughts and begin to reduce or eliminate the impact that setbacks have on your wellbeing.

*When you change what you think, you change what you do.*

## WHAT AM I SAYING TO MYSELF?

What do you say to yourself following setbacks? The experience of negative events frequently causes us to internalize negative messages or blame others for the problems we face. We often make excuses or find fault in others to distance ourselves from setbacks because the thought of change can be overwhelming. Finding the self-motivation to change is difficult; however, if we get stuck in a cycle of simply “bandaiding” the situation we will never do anything to break our negative patterns.

What you say to yourself is linked to discovering the negative messages contained in our “self-talk.” If you are tired of repeating the same negative patterns, you need to be aware of your self-talk and eliminate the excuse and blame language (the “poor me” trap). By taking responsibility for the choices you make, you take ownership of the situation, which may help you modify your behavior in a positive way. *We often create our problems, so why can't we also be the solution?*

### Directions:

In the small space in front of each sentence, check off which of the following messages you say to yourself. Then, following each sentence, list a possible statement that you could say to yourself that would give you the responsibility for change and create a more positive message (for example, instead of saying, “There is so much to do, it’s overwhelming me!” say “I need to prioritize better.”).

1. \_\_\_ I can’t talk to (her); she won’t listen to me. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_ I hate my (job)! \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_ I am so busy; doesn’t anyone else do anything around here? \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_ I have so much to do; I’ll never get organized. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_ This new computer program won’t work. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_ I can’t stand staff meetings; they are useless to me. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_ My family stresses me out! \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_ I always eat too much. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_ I hope I don’t mess up this presentation. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_ It is not fair; why do these things happen to me? \_\_\_\_\_
11. \_\_\_ My (co-workers) drive me crazy. \_\_\_\_\_
12. \_\_\_ I am never going to get a promotion. \_\_\_\_\_
13. \_\_\_ I never have time to exercise. \_\_\_\_\_

## HOW CAN WE ADAPT THESE CONCEPTS TO YOUTH OR THOSE WE SERVE

### Chapter 7: Children and Parents: The Origins of Optimism

This chapter offers a children's attributional style questionnaire (CASQ) for ages eight to 13. (Now available online at <http://www.authentichappiness.org/>)

#### **Example of statements one provider hears from young people:**

- |                            |                               |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| • I don't matter.          | I don't know where to turn to |
| • Why am I here?           | I hate school                 |
| • Life isn't worth living. | What's my purpose?            |
| • I can never get ahead    | Why am I ____?                |
| • I feel stuck.            |                               |

1. List several things the people you work with may be saying to themselves.
2. How might you better support them to pay attention to their self talk?
3. What would support them to start to challenge those negative thoughts and turn them into more optimistic statements?

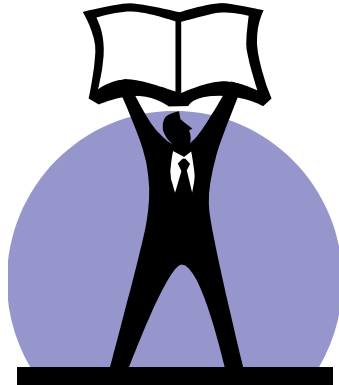
#### **TAKE-AWAYS**

- Whether you are a pessimist or an optimist depends on how you explain bad events to yourself
- Your mother and teachers had the most influence on your "explanatory style"
- Pessimists often personalize bad life events, attributing them to permanent, pervasive causes. Yet they ascribe temporary, impersonal, specific causes to good events.
- The projection of present despair into the future causes hopelessness.
- By contrast, optimists externalize adversity's causes and see them as fleeting and specific. They credit good events to personal, permanent, pervasive causes.
- Optimists are much quicker than pessimist to get over a setback and try again.
- Pessimists have one advantage over optimists: they are better at realistically assessing their situations.
- Through cognitive therapy, it's possible to change your "explanatory style" to be more optimistic.

People with an optimistic style:

- Set higher objectives and have a stronger commitment to their goals

- Cope better with change because they have the mindset that problems and adversities can be overcome.
- Focus on how things can be done and not why they cannot be done
- See success as being permanent and each success motivates them to achieve higher ideals
- Have the belief that they can influence and control their results
- Develop the skills to manage their motivation during difficult time



## **Bringing It Home**

**When you leave the training, what would you do differently?**

**What steps might you take to make these changes?**

**What might you do to pass these skills on to others?**