

Ideas from *Learned Optimism*

By Martin E. P. Seligman

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In 1990 Martin Seligman released his ground breaking book, *Learned Optimism*. Since I have occasionally been accused of behaving Pollyannaish or overly optimistic, his work was of interest to me. Plus it gave me some insights into light hearted concepts. If you have ever wondered if you lean towards optimism or pessimism read on.

Those with a more pessimistic attitude tend to call those with optimism naïve and out of touch with reality. Meanwhile those with a hefty dose of optimism tend to experience their pessimistic friends as discouraging and gloomy. My favoritism may show in the following and I admit it delights me to have my bias confirmed.

When life goes miserably: Seligman describes pessimism as a habit of explaining painful life happenings as permanent, all-encompassing and personal. Pessimists use words like “always” and “never.” (“I’ll never succeed. I’ll always be at the bottom of the garbage bin.”) Their optimistic neighbour, with the mantra of, “This too shall pass,” speaks with words like “sometimes” and “recently.” (“Hey, so what? I sometimes make mistakes but I learn from them.”) Some people find optimists a tad irritating. While pessimists tend to generalize their disappointments (“All politicians are crooked.”) optimists focus on specific incidents of displeasure (“Bill Clinton lied to us about his zipper being zipped”).

When life goes merrily: The pessimistic explanation for happiness is temporary. (“Ah, it was a fluke. My competitor didn’t know what she was doing, so I got the contract.”) That’s when optimists give a permanent explanation based on their character or abilities. (“With my talent, uniqueness, flexibility and charming character, I will continue to attract clients.”) Did I mention that optimists can be a tad irritating? But so can pessimists. It a problem when any strength or quality is taken to an extreme.

As Seligman states, “The optimistic explanatory style for good events is opposite that for bad events. The optimist believes that bad events have specific causes, while good events will enhance everything he does: the pessimist believes that bad events have universal causes & that good events are caused by specific factors.”

Internal versus External: Seligman describes how pessimists tend to internalize responsibility when circumstances are negative. “They think they are worthless, talentless, and unlovable.” They say things like, “I’m stupid. It’s all my fault.” Meanwhile, those with optimism tend to blame other people or circumstances outside themselves. (“They are so stupid; they don’t know a good thing when they see it.”) The danger of extreme optimism is the tendency to avoid responsibility for one’s part in an unsuccessful event. Interestingly, in this facet of human behaviour, I tend to think and act pessimistically by accepting more responsibility for an event than is warranted. To pessimistically take on inappropriate responsibility in the extreme is a sure formula for depression.

If given the chance Seligman and I would vote for optimism. Consider the following:

- Pessimism encourages depression, therefore is associated with a weak immune system.
- Pessimism feels down—blue, sad, worried or anxious.
- Pessimism can become a self-fulfilling prophesy. Because pessimists tend not to create or face challenges, they fail more frequently—even when success is possible.

Seligman says, “The best thing one can say about a pessimist is that his fears were founded.”

- Optimism encourages happiness, therefore is associated with vitality.
- Optimism feels up—hopeful, confident and cheerful.

I say, “The best thing one can say about an optimist is that she enjoyed the challenge regardless of the outcome.”

Optimism needs restraint when the cost of failure of a choice is clearly too high. Then we need to slow down and look at reality. However, it was Dr. Phillip McGraw who said with regret, “Eighty percent of our decisions are based on fear.” If that’s true we live in a pessimistic culture that could use some optimistic balancing. Here are some *how to’s*:

- Realize your beliefs are just that—beliefs. They may or may not be factual.
- Ask if your beliefs are useful and supportive to the kind of life you want for live.
- Argue with yourself. Say “Stop!” to pessimistic self-talk and replace with some optimistic thinking. “I know enough. I do enough.”

- Ask, “What’s the worst that could happen? Do I have a strategy to deal with that outcome?” If not, create one.
- Do something for those who are less fortunate.
- Develop your optimism muscle by seeing the bright side. Change Bad News into Good News. “I don’t like the extra weight on my hips but now there’s more of me to love.”
- Count your blessings.
- Hope for a great today and a better tomorrow.

Optimists and pessimists have been around since Noah. Was he a pessimist to believe the flood was coming or was he an optimist to believe his idea of an arc would help all those critters? Optimists are definitely known for their action and hope.

*“Hope” is the think with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops—at all—*
Emily Dickinson, b. 1830

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