

## **Flexible optimism**

### **The path to wellbeing and productivity**

**Published NZ Business July 2008**

Our habits of thinking have consequences. We can come from either an optimistic or pessimistic viewpoint and neither is right or wrong, however an optimist will not be fazed by defeat. In fact optimists believe defeat is not their fault, and when they are confronted with difficult or trying situations they perceive it as a challenge and try harder. They see bad situations as being simply due to circumstances, bad luck or something that someone else created. They see bad situations or events as temporary and related to one event only.

Pessimists on the other hand tend to think bad events or situations are their fault, that they will last a long time and get in the way of all further activity. They often imagine the worst, tend to give up more easily, their health can often suffer and they are more prone to depression.

Optimists by contrast, have unusually good health, perform better at work and in sport, tend to age well and may even live longer. It is perhaps important at this point to explain that a positive personality does not always mean you respond to adversity and success with optimism. There are many positive people who are not necessarily performing to optimum.

In Professor Martin Seligman's book "Learned Optimism" he speaks of people being able to learn how to remain resilient in the face of defeat. Over 7 years of studies have now revealed that it is not an inborn trait and that it can be acquired. Your habitual way of explaining events Seligman calls your Explanatory Style.

**There are 3 crucial elements of this and he calls them permanence, pervasiveness and personalisation.**

**People who give up easily** tend to believe the bad events that happen are permanent while those who resist the notion of helplessness believe the causes are only temporary. It is not that optimists don't experience failure and feel helpless. It is just that they very quickly bounce back and move on. Pessimists may take days or even months to spring back and after a major defeat may never bounce back.

**The optimistic style of explaining success** is seen in people who believe good events have permanent causes and they are actually more optimistic than those who think their successes are due to temporary causes.

**The second notion of pervasiveness is seen as being specific or universal.**

People who catastrophise tend to collapse in all areas and are the ones who make universal explanations for their failure, even when it may only strike one area. Those who make a more specific explanation may exhibit helplessness in that area yet remain strong in others. **People who make permanent explanations for bad events** will experience long lasting helplessness, while those who see them as temporary experience resilience.

**The third element, personalization has two aspects, internal and external.** Essentially when bad events occur we can blame ourselves or we can blame others. Those who blame themselves tend to demonstrate low self esteem as a consequence. Those who externalise or blame others do not lose self esteem when times are tough. Generally speaking they like themselves better than those who internalise. The optimistic style of explaining good events is again the reverse, that is people who believe they cause good things to occur tend to like themselves better than people who believe good things come from other people or outside circumstances.

*For people who tend to be more pessimistic there are potential “trouble” spots. They are more likely to become depressed, they are more likely to be less productive, their physical health and immune response will be lowered and they will find life less pleasurable.*

**In learning to select and use different explanatory styles people build resilience** and become better equipped to avoid depression and cope with difficult times. Seligman says in his book “Learned Optimism” “ *Life inflicts the same setbacks and tragedies on the pessimist as on the optimist but the optimist weathers them better*” . Becoming an optimist, or being more optimistic involves simply observing how you talk to yourself when you are experiencing a setback and then learning to speak to yourself from a more optimistic viewpoint.

Once you become aware of your way of explaining situations you can then learn 2 things to do to manage your pessimistic viewpoint or beliefs. The first is to use distraction and do something else when the pessimistic thoughts arise. The second is to dispute them, and this is the more effective long term management.

*Suggestion....anytime you find yourself feeling low, angry, or anxious ask what it is you are saying to yourself? Some beliefs are simply not accurate. Any negative beliefs you might hold are actually distortions and you can challenge them. Repeated application of this process demonstrates that problems disappear or have far less import!*

Some work roles benefit from single minded optimism while others benefit when there is a blend of both optimism and pessimism. This is a very important leadership quality for modern business and is called “**Flexible Optimism**”.

**As a special offer to readers we have five FREE SASQ profiles to give away.**

The SASQ profile is the Seligman Attributional Style Questionnaire which measures your optimism and persistence under adversity. High levels of optimism are desirable in certain roles such as sales, brokering, change management. Mild levels of pessimism have their place as well in positions such as accounting, statistics and technical writing.

Professor Martin Seligman, in New Zealand recently asked of the audience “**Given the level of prosperity in this nation why is there so much depression and why is morale so low?**”

From the work of Dr Martin Seligman has evolved a list of characteristics that epitomise the picture of an optimist. Intellectually they are far more creative, more decisive and effective problem solvers. From an interpersonal perspective they are found to be independent individuals who have a strong gift for persuasion. Pro-active rather than reactive, they are bigger risk takers and much more confident. They have a highly competitive nature and are assertive across all areas of operation. They manage their stress well by their positive view of what is occurring.

Motivationally, they seek challenges and are determined and committed to see things through. They are ambitious and apply enthusiasm to all activity. They are goal oriented and time efficient, and remain persistent and resourceful when under pressure. They display a go for it attitude which is infectious and supports their entrepreneurial skills. They are highly self motivated and demonstrate resilience during adversity or under trying conditions.

Go to [www.authentic happiness.org](http://www.authentic happiness.org) and log in

You may complete any of the questionnaires but the one I urge you to do is the VIA Signature strengths questionnaire. It will take approximately 20 minutes and you will receive immediate feedback, select your top 5 signature strengths and print them out.

List them below from the top first

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

Decide to take them with you wherever you go and use them in all situations. As you bring them to the fore in all that you do, whether it is in your job description or not you will notice your relationships improving. You will notice a shift in your perspective of events as you see them in a positive light and you will benefit, and so will others, from the gifts you have that you can use to contribute to make a difference.