
Bonus Material for Your Health – Session Eleven

Explanatory Styles

Martin Seligman is a psychologist who has dedicated his professional life to helping people expand their sense of personal control. The following material is drawn from his book Learned Optimism.

Seligman has determined that the human population can be described on a continuum between two learned habits of *thinking*.

Optimists ←————→ Pessimists

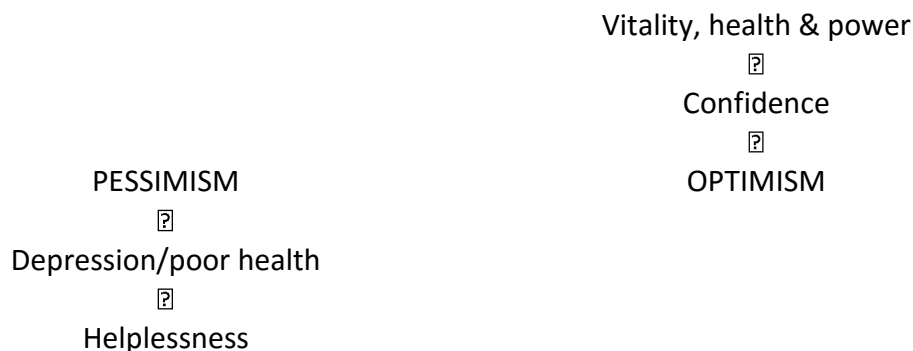
These two habits of thinking determine how people see and experience the world and their lives in it. Both these habits are learned.

These habits of thinking have major consequences. When it comes to health, studies have demonstrated:

- the way you think, especially about your health, changes your health.
- optimists catch fewer infectious diseases than pessimists do.
- optimists have better health habits than pessimists do.
- your immune system works better when you are optimistic.
- that optimists live longer and enjoy a better quality of life than pessimists.

Pessimism is the soil in which depression and helplessness grow. (In other words, your perception is that whatever you do makes no difference.)

Optimism is the soil that supports a life infused with confidence and personal power.



The good news is:

Optimism is a learned skill that can be permanently acquired. Pessimism can be changed with a new set of cognitive skills.



Read Uplifting Information



Write About Uplifting Thoughts

Notice Your Negative Thoughts And Change Them into Positive Thoughts

Explanatory Style

“How do you think about the causes of your misfortunes, small and large, that befall you? Some people, the ones who give up easily, habitually say, of their misfortunes, ‘It’s me, it’s going to last forever, it’s going to determine everything I do.’ Others, those who resist giving in to misfortune say, ‘It’s just circumstances, it’s going away quickly anyway, and besides, there’s much more to life.’

Your habitual way of explaining bad events, your explanatory style, is more than just the words that come out of your mouth when you fail. It is the habit of thought learned in childhood and adolescence.

Your explanatory style stems directly from your view of the world, whether you think you are valuable or deserving, or worthless and hopeless. It is the hallmark of whether you are an optimist or a pessimist.”¹

¹ Martin Seligman, *Learned Optimism*. p. 43-45

Explanatory style – the manner in which you explain to yourself why events happen.

Key dimensions are:

- **Permanence:** relates to time – always, permanent, won't change, never, forever vs. temporary (these words reflect a highly fearful or sympathetic aspect)
- **Pervasiveness:** relates to space – causes vs. specific causes, it seems to be everywhere and I can't escape it
- **Personal:** relates to responsibility – internal (I caused it) vs. external (cause) This always happens to me.

Optimists and pessimists describe good and bad events to themselves quite differently.

| | <i>BAD EVENTS HAPPEN</i> | GOOD EVENTS HAPPEN |
|-------------------|--|--|
| OPTIMISTS | <p>Temporary "This will pass."</p> <p>Specific isolated causes "This doesn't need to affect everything, I can still get on with my day."</p> <p>Personal – external "Who got it wrong?"</p> | <p>Permanent "Things go well for me."</p> <p>Pervasive "I'm good."</p> <p>Personal – internal "I know how to get it right!"</p> |
| PESSIMISTS | <p>Permanent "This is forever, always, never go away," etc.</p> <p>Pervasive "Life is unfair, it's all pretty hopeless."</p> <p>Personal – internal "I must have done something wrong."</p> | <p>Temporary "This is a good day today."</p> <p>Specific "I'm good at this"</p> <p>Personal – external "What a stroke of luck!"</p> |



Making Meaning

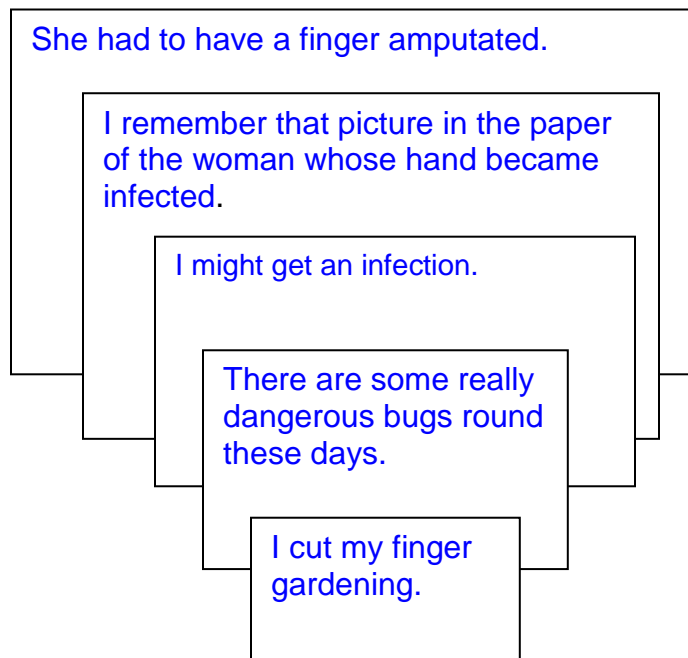
As we review our experiences and as we relate our experiences to others we are engaging in the process of **making meaning**, of interpreting experience and therefore creating experience.

Challenge Yourself



Notice your thoughts and see how many times you can change them.
Notice body sensations and see how easily you can change your meaning.
Create new habits of being positive and optimistic!

The following is an example of universalizing going into **unlimited meaning**. This then causes unlimited suffering. “Catastrophizing” is run away meaning.



Frozen meaning – permanence

What happens when meaning is assigned that is always, forever, permanent, or won't change?
Where the PAST and the FUTURE dominate the PRESENT as in the following example:

- It has always been like this and it will keep on being like this.
- Men are all..... Women are all.....
- “Here **it** comes again.” (What is **it**?)

Frozen Meaning

Past and future dominate and overwhelm.

Fluid meaning

“Finding temporary and specific causes for misfortune is the art of hope.” - Seligman



Thoughts are not merely reactions to events
- they change what ensues.

- Martin Seligman

What can we do?

Gratitude – nurturing a mental habit of gratitude is one of the most potent methods of shifting a pessimistic explanatory style.

This can be done through the daily practice of Intention Statements.

For example:

- Today I _____ am building my sense of gratitude.
- Today I _____ am growing a habit of being grateful.
- Today I _____ am naming things I appreciate every hour.

Or by simply following the practice offered to you in this weeks’ Daily Integral Practice.

Reframe Exercise

When finding yourself spiraling into pessimistic thinking, do the reframe exercise and ask your heart for another, more life affirming perspective.

Mindfulness practice is vital groundwork. Mindfulness practice:

- calls us into the present moment and thus out of frozen meaning. In the present moment every experience is brand new.

-
- helps to stabilize our mind and heightens the awareness that enables us to identify clearly the experience that we are having. We need to know what we are experiencing and thinking first!
 - helps us to become more receptive to new perspectives.

For more on explanatory style read more in your **Bonus Reading**.

This illustration of the Autobiography in Five Chapters and the four stage learning process so nicely complements our Healing Principle for this session.

Healing is an evolving journey of a lifetime - a journey that supports fullness in living and dying. (not "either- or" - living or dying. We are living and dying every day.)

Can you begin to see how changing old, negative habits into positive, life enhancing habits is a lifelong endeavor?

What will it take for you to walk down another street?

Let's explore the process of healing –

- ***challenges you to become aware of previously unconscious ways of behaving; to wake up. This can sometimes be very uncomfortable.***
- ***challenges you to take increasing levels of self-responsibility; the blame game (on self and others) does not support healing.***
- ***beckons you to embark on a journey of gradual development rather than relying on the magic bullet.***
- ***is something that can be learned and practiced.***
- ***it's OK to make mistakes and to fall over – everyone does it, that is how progress happens.***

Autobiography In Five Chapters²

Unconsciously
Unskilled – we don't
know what we don't
know

I walk down the street
There is a deep hole in the
sidewalk
I fall in.
I am lost....I am hopeless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way
out.

Consciously
Unskilled - we
do know what

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the
sidewalk.
I pretend that I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe that I am in the
same place.
But it isn't my fault.
It takes a long time to get out.

Unconsciously
Skilled - owning
new knowina

I walk down another street.

Transition

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk
I see it is there
I still fall in.... it's a habit
My eyes are open
I know where I am
It is my fault
I get out immediately.

Consciously
Skilled - growing

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the
sidewalk
I walk around it.

Complete your day, release it, and wake up inspired.

² Sogyal Rinpoche, *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, p. 31.