**Martin Seligman : Optimism vs. Positive Thinking + Explanatory Styles!**

"Learned optimism is not a rediscovery of the "power of positive thinking." ... Changing the destructive things you say to yourself when you experience the setbacks that life deals all of us is the central skill of optimism." ~ Martin Seligman from *Learned Optimism*

According to Martin Seligman in his great book, *Learned Optimism, f*rom a scientific perspective, "optimism" does not equal positive thinking.

He says: "Pessimists can in fact learn to be optimists, and not through the mindless devices like whistling a happy tune of mouthing platitudes ("Every day, in every way, I'm getting better and better"), but by learning a new set of cognitive skills."

According to Seligman, it's all about the way you interpret something that happens to you. How you think about a positive or negative event determines a lot. He calls it our "explanatory styles."

Shall we explore that a bit more and turn this into a longer "Big Idea"?!? :)

(As you might have noticed :)), we are constantly talking to ourselves. Let's call that our internal dialogue. Imagine something bad happens--whether it's losing your job, or getting in an argument with a friend or spouse. How do you tend to respond? What's your internal dialogue?

Some people, the ones who tend to give up easily, habitually say things like, *"It's my fault, it's going to last forever, and it's going to undermine everything I do."* Others, who are less likely to give in to the tough times, say *"The outcome was out of my control, it's only temporary and, besides, it's only one part of my life."*

We are always interpreting different events--both positive and negative. Seligman calls the way we interpret these events our explanatory style.

He has identified three primary elements of our explanatory style: permanence, pervasiveness, and personalization. Your current tendencies dictate your level of optimism.

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(Note: if you'd like to test your optimism, check out the book or go to authentichappiness.com today!)

--> THE THREE P's

"There are three crucial dimensions to your explanatory style: permanence, pervasiveness, and personalization." ~ Martin Seligman from *Learned Optimism*

Permanence: Is it likely to continue? Is it permanent or temporary?

The permanence is pretty straightforward. Something happens. Do you explain the results as permanent, and likely to recur? Or, do you think it was temporary--just a fluke.

If it's a bad thing, the optimist tends to think it's a fluke. If it's a good thing, they tend to think it's permanent.

The opposite holds true for the pessimist: Good things are the flukes and bad things are more likely to recur.

Pervasiveness: Is it reflective of your whole life? Is it "universal" or is it "specific"?

The pervasiveness looks at whether we believe an event is specific or universal. So, do we think the results of this one event apply to everything in our lives, or just that episode?

With a good event, the optimist is more likely to extend it to her whole life. With a bad event, she will tend to isolate the incident as specific to that situation.

The opposite holds true for the pessimist. If something good happens, they think it was a fluke. If something bad happens, they think it is representative of their whole life.

Personalization: Internal or external?

The personalization looks at whether we believe that we are responsible for the event, or if something outside of our control was responsible. The fancy psychological term for it is "locus of control": whether you believe the control was "internal" or "external."

Something good happens. An optimist pats himself on the back (internal)--saying he did a good job. Same thing happens to a pessimist. He is more likely to attribute the success to luck, other people's hard work, or something else outside of his control (external).

D'oh. Something bad happens. The optimist looks to things outside of himself (external) to explain the event--from bad luck to an off day. The pessimist, although they didn't take responsibility for the good event, are eager to take responsibility for the bad event (internal).

"People who make permanent and universal explanations for their troubles tend to collapse under pressure, both for a long time and across situations." ~ Martin Seligman from *Learned Optimism*

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A note on realism: Seligman addresses the fact that optimism is not always a good thing. In fact, many situations call for a strong level of pessimism and realism. For example, imagine a pilot experiencing trouble with his aircraft. The situation demands brutal realism. Same holds true for a business experiencing troubles. Although you want your leader to have hope and optimism for a bright future, you also need a healthy dose of realism to ensure success.

More Seligman wisdom:

"On a mechanical level, cognitive therapy works because it changes explanatory style from pessimistic to optimistic, and the change is permanent. It gives you a set of cognitive skills for talking to yourself when you fail."

"Practice disputing your automatic interpretations all the time from now on."