

## Exploring Explanatory Styles

Mindset

Exercise

15-20 min

Client

No

People interpret and explain life events in different ways. Explanatory style is a cognitive personality variable reflecting the ways in which people habitually explain the causes of good and adverse events. The explanatory style has three crucial dimensions: permanence, pervasiveness, and personalization. The 'permanence' dimension concerns time. This dimension refers to whether the causes of an event are perceived as temporary or permanent. The 'pervasiveness' dimension involves the generalizability of an event; in other words, is the event believed to have a specific cause or a universal cause? Finally, the 'personalization' dimension is about who we believe is responsible for the event, ourselves (internal), or someone or something else (external).

According to Seligman (2006), pessimists and optimists differ significantly in the explanatory style when facing positive and negative life events. Optimistic people attribute the cause of positive life events to internal, permanent, and universal factors and the cause of adverse life events to external, temporary, and specific factors. On the contrary, pessimistic people attribute the cause of positive life events to external, temporary, and specific factors and the cause of adverse life events to internal, permanent, and universal factors.

Imagine, for example, being hired for a job. An optimistic person tends to attribute such an event to personal characteristics, such as being intelligent and highly skilled (internal factors), which are steady over time (permanent) and applicable to other situations, such as in the event of applying for another job or in regards to accomplishing other things in other areas of life (universal). A pessimistic person, by comparison, tends to attribute such an event to things outside himself, such as competing with few other applicants (external), and to the particularities of this job (specific), and believe the reason for being hired will not last or will change over time or across situations (temporary).

Now consider a person who is not hired for the job. A pessimistic person will tend to believe the cause of the event has something to do with him or herself, such as not being intelligent enough (internal), which will not change over time (permanent), and is seen in many other situations and circumstances (universal). By contrast, an optimistic person may attribute not being hired to not having the relevant skills for the job (external) and will believe that he will get hired elsewhere in the future (temporary) because not getting hired only happened because of the skills required for this particular job (specific).

An optimistic explanatory style is associated with higher levels of motivation, achievement, and physical well-being and lower levels of depressive symptoms (for a recent review, see Buchanan & Seligman, 1995) and suicidal ideation (Hirsch et al., 2009). According to Seligman (2006), people can 'learn optimism.' This tool was designed to help people become aware of their explanatory styles in everyday life.



## Author

This tool was created by Hugo Alberts (Ph.D.) and Lucinda Poole (Psy.D.).



## Goal

The goal of this tool is to help clients examine their explanatory styles to allow them to experience the difference between interpreting and explaining life events.



## Advice

- The idea with this tool is to make clients aware of their explanatory styles in everyday life instead of pushing them to adopt an optimistic explanatory style. With awareness comes choice; clients can choose the type of explanatory style that will be most effective in a given situation.
- Advise your clients that being overly optimistic can be costly, such as when trying to play for a risky or uncertain future. This is because pessimism helps us maintain caution, prudence, and analytic thinking (which are critical components to effective decision-making).



## References

- Buchanan, G. M., & Seligman, M. E. P. (Eds.). (1995). *Explanatory style*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Hirsch, J. K., Wolford, K., LaLonde, S. M., Brunk, L., & Parker-Morris, A. (2009). Optimistic explanatory style as a moderator of the association between negative life events and suicide ideation. *The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention*, 30, 48-53.
- Peterson, C., & Buchanan, G. M. (1995). Explanatory style: History and evolution of the field. In G. M. Buchanan & M. E. P. Seligman (Eds.), *Explanatory style* (pp. 1-20). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Seligman, M. E. (2006). *Learned optimism: How to change your mind and your life*. Vintage Books.



## Exploring Explanatory Styles

### Instructions

#### Part 1: Visualize a negative life event from two different perspectives

In this exercise, we are going to visualize a situation from two different perspectives: first, from a pessimistic perspective and then from an optimistic perspective.

Gently close your eyes to begin and allow yourself to be present.

Now, I'm going to ask you to imagine that you have just been laid off at work. This has come at quite a surprise; you thought things were going OK.

Now, imagine that the reason you were laid off was fundamentally your fault... Which of your skills and personal characteristics likely led you to be fired...? What aspects of yourself and your personality played a role in the situation?

Now, imagine that the situation was permanent... Rather than changing or getting better over time, the situation will stay the same. Being fired today means that you are someone who won't be able to find another job... You may well stay unemployed forever.

Now, think about when this type of thing has happened in other areas of your life... When have other good things not lasted? Past romantic relationships, friendships, holidays, hobbies...?

OK now, let this scenario go, and come back to where you are right now, sitting here, in this room. Keep your eyes closed and take three deep, slow breaths.

We'll now look at the same situation in a different way. Bring back to mind the image of being unexpectedly laid off at work.

This time, imagine that you were laid off was because of circumstances outside of your control... such as the company going under or your superiors feeling threatened by your accomplishments.

Now, imagine that the situation was only temporary... You have faith that you won't be unemployed forever... you will find another job, and soon.

Now, remind yourself that this setback is only occurring in one aspect of your life... you have plenty of other things going on, such as family, hobbies, your pet, and these things in your life are relatively unaffected by this situation at work.

Good, now let the image of being fired go and come back to the present moment... keep your eyes closed and take a deep, slow breath.



### Evaluation:

- What was it like to view the situation from a pessimistic perspective?
- What was it like to view the situation from an optimistic perspective?
- Was there a difference in how you felt in each of these mindsets?
- Did one mode feel more familiar to you than the other? If so, which? This gives you an indication of your explanatory style, which is the way you explain life events and experiences to yourself.

### Part 2: Visualize a positive life event from two different perspectives

In part 2 of the exercise, we are going to visualize a situation from two different perspectives: first, from a pessimistic perspective and then from an optimistic perspective.

Gently close your eyes to begin and allow yourself to be present.

Now, I'm going to ask you to imagine that you have just received a promotion at work. Picture yourself at work, having just heard the good news from your boss.

Now, imagine that the reason you were promoted was not so much to do with you as it was to do with luck and/or other factors... perhaps you were promoted only because the person above you quit or because you were (luckily) part of a team that excelled this year...

Now, imagine that this situation was temporary... You might think to yourself; surely this won't last, I'm not good enough to keep this position for very long....

Now, imagine that your good fortune only applies to your working life... if only you were so lucky in other areas of your life, like with relationships or your health.

OK, now as best you can, let everything go and come back to where you are right now, sitting here, in this room. Keep your eyes closed and take three deep, slow breaths.

We'll now look at the same situation in a different way. Bring back to mind the image of being unexpectedly promoted at work.

This time, imagine that you were promoted purely because of yourself... because you have been an excellent employee...

Now, imagine that the situation will last... This new position will suit you well... and you are ready to take on the challenge of stepping up to the plate...

Now, consider what else is going well for you in your life... where else have you excelled or experienced good fortune lately?

Very good. Now let the image of being promoted go and come back to the present moment... keep your eyes closed and take a deep, slow breath.



### Evaluation:

- What was it like to view this positive event from a pessimistic perspective?
- What was it like to view this positive event from an optimistic perspective?
- Was there a difference in how you felt between the two experiences?
- Did one mode feel more familiar to you than the other? If so, which?