



Learning to be Optimistic

Over the last decade there has been something of a revolution in psychology. Whereas psychology was originally inextricably tied with philosophy, starting with Sigmund Freud the attention shifted from embracing the breadth of human experience towards a focus on understanding psychological suffering and pathology. This has been fruitful in expanding our knowledge of the causes, and treatments, for many disorders but at a cost. Within this perspective, psychological health is primarily viewed as the absence of illness. Feeling good is good mostly because it isn't feeling bad.

This is changing. A new development in psychological theory, research and intervention has emerged that explicitly considers those aspects of human experience that include joy, enlightenment, courage, compassion and love. This movement is best encapsulated under the general rubric of positive psychology. Many deserve credit however perhaps the leading pioneer on this path is the psychologist Martin Seligman. Seligman first gained prominence developing the concept of 'learned helplessness', a model whereby animals and humans become hopeless and helpless when their experiences lead them to believe that their efforts make no difference to their future. Seligman subsequently applied his enquiring mind to develop the corollary to this concept "learned optimism". Within this framework individuals who believe that their efforts are likely to lead to desired outcomes are more likely to persist and less likely to suffer from psychological distress. In a series of experiments, Seligman and his colleagues have demonstrated that, indeed, those individuals who demonstrate optimistic beliefs about themselves and their experiences are more likely to be happy and successful in their personal, family and work lives. In order to develop this approach Seligman described five basic steps:

A: Identify those **A**dverse situations or events that you routinely face.

B: Pay attention to your automatic thoughts or **B**eliefs about that event

C: Look at the **C**onsequences of these beliefs. Are they likely to strengthen our confidence and will, or do they drain our energy and make us want to give up?

D: If our beliefs do not lead us to positive action and hope, learn to challenge and **D**ispute them. Are they realistic, useful or based on solid evidence? Are we making unwarranted assumptions and are there equally likely alternative explanations for situations?

E: Finally, pay attention to and use your **E**nergy when you embrace an alternative, optimistic mindset. You will notice that this energy feeds itself as you replace negative self-defeating patterns of thinking and interpretation with more realistic and adaptive ones. Eventually, the positive explanatory style becomes your default response

This does not mean adopting a naïve positivism that denies that bad things happen that are beyond our control. They do. However, it makes little sense to adopt a worldview in anticipation of the worst. The glass is both half empty and half full. What is your choice?