

The 3 P's: A Framework for Learned Optimism

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Description

Do you look at life and see a glass half full or half empty? An optimist is a person who tends to be hopeful and confident about the future or the success of something; a pessimist is a person who tends to see the worst aspect of things or believe that the worst will happen. Whether you're an optimist or a pessimist, your ability to deal with hard things comes down to what Martin Seligman calls our "explanatory styles" — how we explain what's happening in our world. Specifically, the three Ps, a framework known as Learned Optimism: Permanence, Pervasiveness and Personalization. These three areas are key to how we perceive ourselves. Self-criticism can turn self-destructive if you focus on the wrong thing in any of these areas.



Permanence: In this context permanence has to do with how we look at a setback, as temporary or permanent. Is this really going to last forever, or is this something I can get past in a short time? For example, "I'm never going to be smart enough" versus "I just haven't learned that yet." An optimist looks at a bad event as a temporary thing they can quickly bounce back from; a pessimist would look at the same bad event and feel it would take them a long time to recover, if at all. Also, optimists believe that good things happen for a reason and go so far as to say there are no coincidences.

Pervasiveness: In this context, pervasiveness refers to how much a setback or bad event affects other, unrelated areas of your life. Is this problem an unavoidable law of the universe or is it conditional? For example, "I'm incapable of being organized" versus "I need to practice being more structured." An optimist will look at the situation as temporary and fixable while the pessimist will look at the situation as something that will last forever.

Personalization: In this context personalization is thinking the problem is a fault with who you are rather than a thing that just happened. For example, "I didn't get the job because I'm hopeless" versus "My qualifications are better suited to another position." Realizing outside factors have caused a bad situation allows us to reduce the blame and criticism we put on ourselves.

Source:

Seligman, M. (2006). *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* Vintage Books A Division of Random House, Inc. New York



The Pollyanna Principle

Description

When you think of “bias” you probably think of it in terms of something negative. It’s true, bias is generally a bad thing since it involves having preconceived notions about things that may turn out to be false, unrealistic, or even harmful; however, a bias isn’t always a bad thing. In fact, there is a bias that helps us be happier, healthier, and more connected with others. It’s called the positivity bias or the “Pollyanna Principle.” It’s named after a character in a classic children’s book and popular Disney movie about a girl named Pollyanna who is always upbeat and optimistic despite the tragic loss of her father.

In his book, *A primer in positive psychology*, Chris Peterson described the Pollyanna Principle as the human tendency to focus on the positive and use more positive words and terms during a conversation. There are tons of examples of positivity bias that you might recognize, such as: when you think back on your day, your memory probably focuses on the good things that happened, like receiving good news on a project at work. Unless you are going through a particularly challenging time, your text messages, social media posts, and emails to friends and family have more positive words and references than negative ones. Or, if someone asks you to describe yourself, you likely start off with positive attributes (e.g., caring, funny, good listener, responsible).

Choosing to set our sights on the positive or succumb to the negative is entirely up to us.

Source:

Peterson, C. (2006). *A primer in positive psychology* Oxford University Press New York



The 3 Ps Worksheet

How you talk to yourself inside your head can have a huge impact on how you act in real life. Put succinctly, Learned Optimism is a concept that says we can change our attitude and behaviors – by recognizing and challenging our negative self-talk. The next time you feel yourself swept away by a negative event or not fully appreciating a positive one, use this worksheet to fine-tune your Ps.

Directions

1. Pick a hard experience that is happening now
2. Write out how you could think about the situation as Personal, Permanent, and Pervasive
3. Next, change your point of view and write out how the experience could be Impersonal, Transitory, and Specific

Worked Example

Let's imagine you lost your job:

Personal	Permanent	Pervasive
I am not a good enough person There's something wrong with me	I will never find another job	I have failed as an employee

Impersonal	Transitory	Specific
My program is in the middle of switching from an acquisition strategy to a sustainment strategy and my skill set does not fit the switch.	I will find a job better suited to my skills set soon	This situation applies to my work life, if does not apply to my family life, my social life, or my other interests



The 3 Ps Worksheet

Personal	Permanent	Pervasive

Impersonal	Transitory	Specific