



Benefits of Optimism

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

In 1988, Olympic swimmer Matt Biondi was favored to win all seven events he had entered. Preparing for his first event, the 200-meter freestyle, he shook himself a little to get loose and set his mind on winning. At the gun, he hit the water and gave it his all but when the waves had settled at the end of the race, he had finished a disappointing third. In his second event, the 100-meter butterfly, he led the field until the last two meters where he was caught and he finished second. The commentators speculated that this was such a crushing blow to him that it would break his concentration in the coming events and detract from his performance. He went on however to win gold in all five of his remaining events.

How did Biondi do it? Aside from being an outstanding swimmer, he was also an exceptional optimist. He had reassured himself, after the first two losses, that he would do better in his upcoming events.

This simple act of positive psychology may have been all he needed. Psychologist Martin Seligman, author of the book *Learned Optimism*, studied Biondi and hundreds of other optimists as part of his ongoing research. Optimism has been defined by some researchers as simply seeing the silver lining, and by others as a personality trait. Seligman took a different approach and began to study it as an explanatory style. He suggests that your explanation for why something happens has a major impact on how you will act in the future and what result your actions will bring about. This in turn has an eventual impact on your self-esteem and self-image.

Seligman actually started by studying depression. One key factor in depression is personal control. People become depressed when they feel they have no control over their lives and experience a sense of helplessness.

When studying the causes of depression, Seligman discovered that there were groups of people who should be depressed but who weren't. He found that there were some people who had every reason to be depressed—people who were going through the stress of a divorce or being forced to move from their home or experiencing the death of a loved one—but who did not succumb to severe depression.

In studying these folks, Seligman learned that they all had one thing in common. They were all optimistic. He learned about some traits of optimism too. They are:

- 1) Positive anticipation of the future: Optimists say to themselves, “Things might be bad right now but they will get better soon” or “I might be having problems right now but I’ll do better in the future.”
- 2) Not letting past failures overwhelm you: Optimists keep moving on. They do not linger on their mistakes or failures.
- 3) Three P’s of optimism: Pervasive... Optimists are optimistic in almost all situations they encounter and think that good things happen for global reasons (“I’m smart” or “I’m good” as opposed to “I’m good at this one thing”). Permanence... Optimists believe that good events happen due to permanent causes (“I did well because I am a hard worker”)

and bad events due to temporary causes (“the boss yelled at me because he’s in a bad mood today”). Pessimists think the opposite, good events happen for temporary causes and bad events happen due to permanent causes (“the boss yelled at me because I always make mistakes”). And not Personal... Optimists don’t take things personally. They tend to attribute difficulties to outside causes as opposed to personal failings. They realize “it’s not all about me.”

When Seligman identified people who think optimistically, he found it was a learned behavior. That means you can teach someone to be optimistic. He also found that there are some benefits to being optimistic. For instance, optimists tend to be healthier and live longer, are more satisfied in their relationships, are more successful in work and school and in athletics, and are happier with life than pessimists.

Finally, Seligman researched how to become more optimistic. He even developed a curriculum to teach children how to become optimistic. His ideas are clearly described in *Learned Optimism* and his other books, with numerous good examples of what he means. One way to improve your level of optimism is to read one of his books and apply his principles. Here are two brief examples of what he suggests:

- Replace pessimistic thoughts with optimistic thoughts by disputing the pessimistic thought in your mind. You can do this by finding data or evidence to show that your pessimistic thought is not accurate. For example, you don't *always* talk too loudly, only *sometimes*.
- Distract yourself from a recurrent pessimistic thought by training yourself to recognize when the pessimistic thought occurs. When it occurs, think STOP and picture a stop sign. Then think of something positive and pleasant to replace the pessimistic thought.

These skills are not as easy as they seem. They take practice but the results can be profound. This is some great stuff that can make a real difference in your life.

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