Chapter Three
Optimism and Hope

A story about optimists and pessimists

People can be differentiated to the extent that they have different *expectancies* about the achievement of their goals, and other future events. *Optimists* have a generalized sense of confidence about the future, characterized by their broad expectancy that outcomes are likely to be positive. *Pessimists*, on the other hand, have a generalized sense of doubt and hesitancy, characterized by their anticipation of negative outcomes. So is it better to be an optimist or a pessimist?

Why it is good to be an optimist

Positive psychology research has found many advantages of adopting an optimistic viewpoint. Here are some of them:

- Optimists experience less distress than pessimists when dealing with difficulties in their lives. For example, they suffer much less anxiety and depression.
- Optimists adapt better to negative events (including coronary artery bypass surgery, breast cancer, abortion, bone marrow transplantation and AIDS).
- Optimism protects new mothers against developing depression following the birth of their baby.
- Optimism is conducive to problem-focused coping, humour, making plans, positive reframing (putting the situation in the best

possible light) and, when the situation is uncontrollable, accepting the reality of the situation. Optimists are capable of learning lessons from negative situations. Thus optimists have a coping advantage over pessimists.

- Perhaps surprisingly, optimists don't tend to use denial, whereas pessimists often attempt to distance themselves from the problem. Optimists are not simply people who stick their heads in the sand and ignore threats to their well-being. For example, they attend to health warnings and usually discover potentially serious problems earlier rather than later.
- Optimists exert more continuous effort and tend not to give up, possibly assuming that the situation can be handled successfully in one way or another. Pessimists, on the other hand, are far more likely to anticipate disaster – and, as a result, are more likely to give up.
- Optimists report more health-promoting behaviours (like eating a healthy diet or having regular medical check-ups) and enjoy better physical health than pessimists.
- Optimists seem to be more productive in the workplace (Robbins et al., 1991; Carver & Scheier, 2002).

Furthermore, over the past century, 85 per cent of US presidential elections were won by the more optimistic candidate (Zullow et al., 1988) – which, however, does not necessarily mean the best candidate! The conclusions of one insurance sales study contain a warning for pessimistic salespersons. Apparently, when the salespeople scoring in the top 10 per cent in an optimism questionnaire were compared with those scoring in the bottom 10 percent, it transpired that the former sold 88 per cent more insurance (Seligman & Schulman, 1986).

Can optimism be learnt?

Quite simply – yes. Although there may well be a genetically inherited component to optimism, and early childhood experiences certainly shape our optimistic–pessimistic viewpoint, we can use several strategies to counter pessimism.

The first of these is a *disputing* strategy, introduced by Martin Seligman (1991) in his bestseller *Learned Optimism*. We usually employ the skill of internal disputing when we are falsely accused of something by another person. We think to ourselves, for example: 'That's not right. It's him who is not listening, it's not me. I always listen before reaching a conclusion.' However, when we falsely accuse ourselves of something (e.g. not being capable of dealing with a difficult situation), we don't tend to dispute it. The key to success is careful monitoring and recognition of our thoughts. Once a negative thought is detected, we can consciously dispute that thought and try to look at possible alternative outcomes.

Changing and monitoring your *explanatory style* is another useful strategy. Explanatory style refers to the way in which we explain the causes and influences of previous positive and negative events.

A pessimistic explanatory style means we use internal, stable and global explanations for bad events, and external, unstable and specific explanations for good ones. People who use this style tend to appraise bad events in terms of personal failure.

An optimistic explanatory style, on the other hand, is characterized by external (leaving one's self-esteem intact), unstable and specific (depending on circumstances) explanations for bad events, and by the opposite pattern for good ones. Table 3.1 gives some examples of optimistic and pessimistic explanatory styles.

Needless to say, Seligman recommends monitoring your automatic thoughts and attitudes and disputing pessimistic explanations.

TABLE 3.1 OPTIMISTIC AND PESSIMISTIC EXPLANATORY STYLES

EVENT	OPTIMIST WOULD SAY:	PESSIMIST WOULD SAY:
Good event (e.g. passing an exam)	*Internal:* I've done a great job. *Stable:* I am talented. *Global:* This was a good start to the exam season. The other ones should be easy too.	*External:* Don't know how this happened. It must've been luck. *Unstable:* Every dog has its day. *Specific:* So what? I can still fail the next one.
Bad event (e.g. failing an exam)	*External:* The exam questions were simply terrible. *Unstable:* No problem, I'll pass it next time round. *Specific:* Yesterday was my birthday after all.	*Internal:* It's all my fault, I haven't prepared well. *Stable:* I am never going to pass this exam. *Global:* This is the end to my dreams; I'll never become who I want to be.

Tips & Tools

When disputing pessimistic explanations . . .

ask yourself what *evidence* you have for your beliefs. See if you can find an *alternative* explanation for failure. Even if an optimistic explanation is not applicable, what are the *implications* of this adversity? Is it really that catastrophic? If you cannot decide which explanation is more valid, think which one is more *useful* for your mood (Carr, 2004).

During lectures on this subject, at the point when I have nearly sold optimism as well as the positive attribution style to my listeners, I am usually met with a variation on the following question: 'Surely you are not saying that blaming anyone else but yourself when things go wrong is a good idea?' This is a very good question. The research that I know of does not seem to tackle the impact of an optimistic explanatory style on those close to the optimists, nor does it report on whether optimism is associated with qualities such as self-centredness.

Why it is good to be a pessimist

There are occasions when pessimism can do more to ensure the safety of your life. Optimistic thinking is associated with an underestimation of risks (Peterson & Park, 2003), so optimists are more likely to take part in high-risk activities such as unprotected sex or reckless driving. Optimism is also hardly desirable if, for example, a pilot is deciding whether a plane should take off during an ice-storm.

In the case of serious traumatic events (e.g. death, fire, flood or violent rape), optimists may not be well prepared and their beautiful, rosy world may be shattered into pieces (although optimists might be better equipped to rebuild it than pessimists).

Furthermore, research has found that there is a type of pessimist who hardly ever benefits from learning how to be optimistic and adopting a positive mood. This characteristic is called 'defensive pessimism'. It is a cognitive strategy to set low expectations for upcoming performance, despite having performed well previously in similar circumstances. Defensive pessimists use the expectation that things will turn out badly as a coping mechanism: they perform better when they're allowed to imagine what could go wrong and keep hold of their low expectations. Defensive pessimism helps anxious people manage their anxiety and, contrary to what you might think, trying to be optimistic actually makes their performance worse! Over time, defensive pessimists start feeling

better about themselves, become happier, perform better academically and make more progress on their personal goals than equally anxious people who do not use defensive pessimism (Norem & Chang, 2002).

What about realism?

This is another difficult question to answer, simply because realism does not seem to be in fashion at the moment. Having carefully analysed the indexes of five major volumes on positive psychology, I found only one reference to this term.

If a principal motivation of a realist is to understand themselves and the world as it is and to maintain a consistent and accurate self-image, it would be common sense to assume that such a disposition could benefit from the strengths of both optimism and pessimism, while avoiding the pitfalls associated with both.

Ed Diener (2003), one of the greatest researchers on happiness, writes: 'it might not be desirable for an individual to be too optimistic; perhaps people are better off if they are a mix of optimism and pessimism' (p. 117). Barbara Ehrenreich (2010), probably the most prominent critic of the positive psychology movement, goes much further to suggest that it is the positive or optimistic thinking that may actually be responsible for the banking crisis, for making some chronic illnesses worse, and for the enormous amounts of money spent on 'improving' ourselves when the real impediments to happiness lie far beyond our control.

Perhaps our Western societies need some realists: people who follow current affairs, feel for the suffering around the world and assume some responsibility for the causes and implications of this adversity. People who choose to do something about it, despite their limited chances of success.

But then again, at least some optimism seems necessary to motivate us to take the very next step forward. Sandra Schneider writes at length about realistic vs. unrealistic optimism, stressing the difference between 'fuzzy' knowledge and 'fuzzy' meaning, and the importance of reality

checks. Fuzzy knowledge is about not knowing the facts, while fuzzy meaning is about having some latitude in interpretations. Optimism is not a good way to deal with fuzzy knowledge. If you don't know your level of cholesterol, it doesn't make sense to just assume you are safe from cardiac disease. However, many situations in life are, in fact, open to interpretation – and this is where optimism can be useful (Schneider, 2001). In fact, both Schneider's and Seligman's approaches advocate the same principle – that of flexibility of thinking when it comes to interpreting the meaning of events. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that many resilience programmes (see Chapter 14) are based on the theories of optimism, teaching students to question their habitual explanations for misfortunes.

Tips & Tools

Positive realism or realistic optimism?

Blind optimism may result in carelessness and unrealistic expectations, which is unproductive in the long run. This can be avoided if you don't allow wishful thinking to influence your judgements. Being positive is compatible with being realistic. It does not mean expecting only positive outcomes, but having confidence that even if things don't go your way, you will be able to deal with the situation (or even somehow benefit from it) (Popovic, 2005).

Goals Scale

Completing this questionnaire may tell you something about yourself. It is explained more fully after the box, but if you decide to fill it in, don't look until you have actually done so.

Directions: Read each question carefully. Using the scale shown below, please select the number that best describes YOU and put this number in the blank provided.

1 = Definitely False
2 = Mostly False
3 = Mostly True
4 = Definitely True

___ 1. I can think of many ways to get out of a jam.
___ 2. I energetically pursue my goals.
___ 3. I feel tired most of the time.
___ 4. There are lots of ways around my problem.
___ 5. I am easily downed in an argument.
___ 6. I can think of many ways to get things in life that are most important to me.
___ 7. I worry about my health.
___ 8. Even when others get discouraged, I know I can find a way to solve the problem.
___ 9. My past experiences have prepared me well for my future.
___ 10. I've been pretty successful in life.
___ 11. I usually find myself worrying about something.
___ 12. I meet the goals that I set for myself.

Now add together your scores for Questions 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10 and 12, and read on.

You have just filled in the questionnaire on hope (Lopez et al., 2004). Your score, which will range from 8 to 32, should show how hopeful you are. Don't worry about Questions 3, 5, 7 and 11 – they are simply distracters and should not be counted towards the final result. Read on to find out how positive psychology views hope and what can be done to increase it.

Is there any hope?

Hope is a construct that is closely related to optimism, although the two are not identical. Rick Snyder, one of the leading specialists in hope, represents it as an ability to conceptualize goals, find pathways to these goals despite obstacles and have the motivation to use those pathways (Lopez et al., 2004). To put it more simply, we feel hopeful if we: (a) know what we want, (b) can think of a range of ways to get there and (c) start and keep on going.

Pathway thinking, or generating several workable routes to the goal, is very important because a particular route may not always be the best. Even if the main route is blocked, a hopeful person will find other options open to him or her. Questions 1, 4, 6 and 8 of the Goals Scale measured your pathways score. However, knowing how to go about something is not enough, you need to get moving! This is where agency thoughts (such as 'I can do this', 'I won't be stopped') come into play. Motivation is not only about starting, it's also about staying energized and 'on task'. Questions 2, 9, 10 and 12 measured your motivation or agency.

It's not hard to see that being hopeful brings about many benefits. For example, we know that hope buffers against interfering, self-deprecatory thoughts and negative emotions, and is critical for psychological health. In the domain of physical health, we know that people who are hopeful focus more on the prevention of diseases (e.g. through exercising). Athletes with higher levels of hope are more successful in their performance. Furthermore, based on research with college students, it appears that hope bears a substantial relationship to academic achievement (Snyder et al., 2002).

Snyder and his colleagues (2002) emphasize a cognitive rather than an emotional approach to hope, claiming that positive emotions are the result of concluding that we are pursuing goals successfully. This means that they see hope as a goal-pursuit thinking that causes emotions. As often happens in psychology, many other researchers would not subscribe to this view, conceptualizing hope as an emotion in itself (Farina et al., 1995).

Tips & Tools

Let's hope

To generate hope, first formulate your goals, think of several ways of how these can be achieved and select the best one, break your goals into smaller sub-goals, motivate yourself to pursue your goals and reframe any obstacles you meet as challenges to be overcome (Carr, 2004).

On 7 July 2005, I was in Central London, stopping frequently to catch the latest news about the four explosions in the city and responding to multiple phone calls from family and friends, checking to see if I was okay. In the midst of this nightmare, with images of buses without their tops and reports of people still stuck in the Underground, I am not optimistic about the future. Having learnt from the post-September 11 trajectory, I can see the rise in the psychology of fear on English soil, anti-terrorist measures dominating the media, and the celebrated multiculturalism of London descending into hatred and suspicion towards the Muslim population. Yet I am hopeful. Hopeful that everything will be alright in the end, despite the fact that I do not know what this 'alright' may look like, how we can get there and whether I personally can do anything about it. As far as I can see, my experience of the present moment is stripped of both being able to envisage the pathways and of feeling that my personal agency can have much effect on the final and very unclear outcome. In spite of that, I still feel the emotion of hope, which remains even in contradiction to the theory I have just described above.

Further reading

Seligman, M.E.P. (1991). *Learned optimism*. New York: Knopf.