

## Learning Optimism Jude LaClaire, Ph.D.

*I have become my own version of an optimist. If I can't make it through one door, I'll go through another door-or I'll make another door. Something terrific will come no matter how dark the present.*

Rabindranath Tagore

How do you respond to obstacles and challenges? How do you interpret people's behavior and events? The answers to these questions may indicate whether you are an optimist or a pessimist; two distinct ways of looking at the world.

What is the point of view of the optimist or a pessimist? David Fresco, Ph.D. measures optimism with three criteria:

1. Persistence of cause: The cause is clearly leading to the effect, and that is true over time.
2. Specific vs. global: There are specific reasons something happened, and what happened is clear.
3. Responsibility: There are actions I can take to change the situation.

People who are less optimistic or pessimistic show these characteristics:

1. There is no real relationship between cause and effect or it is more happenstance.
2. Things just happened.
3. I am the victim of what has occurred.

You begin to see that pessimists tend to think globally rather than specifically and their attribution of cause is outside of themselves. If we habitually think this way rather than looking at specific events in the light of cause and effect, believing we can effect some change, we will be on the road to victimhood and learned helplessness.

Research indicates that the qualities of optimism and pessimism are largely learned behaviors. We can learn to discern what situations call for optimism and what may call for caution, paying more attention to all the facts of the situation. Dr. Seligman, author of "Learned Optimism", calls this "flexible optimism." This sounds like a healthy way of living. Learning these skills can help you to avoid depression and anxiety. Global thinking like believing bad things are going to last forever will definitely lead to depression. If you can look at the situation and see that it is time-limited or a one-time event, then you will probably have a more positive approach to getting through the hard time.

Marsha Rideout in EQ Today suggests the following as "Optimism Reminders:"

- Only this situation
- Positive past experiences
- Temporary
- I have support
- Mentor's example

- Imagine success
- Sometimes isn't forever
- My effort matters

These simple steps can be the difference between getting lost in a helpless, hopeless maze of victimhood or a path to positive problem solving.

In the United States and other industrialized countries depression rates are on the increase. It is interesting to speculate the reasons for the higher rates in the most affluent countries and lower rates in countries where there is often more poverty, political and social instability. Dr. Seligman and others believe that our material prosperity along with an emphasis on 'self-esteem' and 'feeling good' as necessary elements in a child's life contribute to behaviors of helplessness and blaming.

If we accept that sadness and joy, peace and anger, fear and confidence all exist in the world as natural phenomena, then we aren't so upset when these things occur or don't occur. We accept the notion that loss is a natural event and we can grieve, showing various emotions, integrating the experience as part of our life journey. The skills needed to face sadness, anger and fear are essential for a healthy life. When children do not learn the coping mechanisms for facing challenges and have expectations for feeling good and getting self-esteem boosters from others, they become more dependent on the outer environment and less dependent on themselves.

Think about your responses to people and events. If you see that you tend to be more pessimistic, try re-framing the situation with some of the ideas from Dr. Fresco and Ms. Rideout. You may be in for a pleasant surprise. There may be more doors to solutions than you ever imagined.

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