

Lesson 5

Using the ABC technique to foster optimism

Introduction

The way we understand our experiences is key to whether we evaluate them in a positive light or not. By addressing your thinking, you can learn how to be more optimistic.

In this lesson, you'll learn how to appraise situations more positively using Seligman's ABC Model. It might be tricky at first, especially if you're not used to thinking optimistically. With practice, you'll get the hang of it.

You'll also learn of three key prompts that will help you use this explanatory style, and help shift your way of thinking into a more optimistic one.

The science

People have their own way of viewing an experience. This is your explanatory style. This influences your expectations and thoughts about future events.

Optimists view scenarios as deriving from outside themselves and throw a more positive light on the likely outcome, and what it means for them. They might make a small change to their work habits, use the event as a learning opportunity, believe that things will be different next time, and they will be able to handle similar future situations more skilfully.

Pessimists attribute negative events to themselves. Any hiccup and they believe they're a failure. They personalise the outcome. They catastrophise about it and are likely to use language linked to depressive thinking or 'all or nothing thinking,' for instance, 'I always mess up,' 'It's all my fault,' 'I'll never get another job.' They believe other parts of their life will be affected by their incompetence, they'll never be able to change, and effects of the problem will be long-lasting.

Explanatory style is very close to helplessness theory. When you feel helpless, you feel that whatever you do will not lead to anything good, and anything that happens that is positive, is due to luck.

Value

Adjusting your explanatory style to a more optimistic one helps motivate you to carry on, to strive for greatness, and to sustain good working relationships.

Looking optimistically at situations means that you will see opportunities for learning new skills. You will be more content, as you'll learn to leave any issues back at the office. You'll be better able to enjoy your free time.

Showing flexibility and a willingness to overcome any barriers will impress others, including the boss! It will instil confidence in others that you are resilient and have a certain sense of control that enables you to do the job better. It will help you reach your life goals and have a happier life.

Exercise

Take a look at the following situation.

The boss complained that Sean's report was late and the clients withdrew their contract offer. If Sean was thinking pessimistically, he'd say something like, 'That's all I need. It's all my fault. I'm going to get fired.'

If Sean was more optimistic, he'd evaluate the situation as stemming from a problem with the upload and say something like, 'It *was* delivered, just a little later than expected. There must have been other reasons for the offer falling through. I'll apologise to my boss and I'm sure she'll understand. I'll make sure I send the next report much earlier.'

These attributes, or cognitive distortions as psychologists call them, are known as the 3 Ps - **Personalisation**, **Pervasiveness** and **Permanence**. They are the ways you tend to explain a situation. You can challenge them effectively using Seligman's ABC model.

Video: Seligman's ABC model

A	Adversity	E.g. Arguing with Tom from the IT department.
B	Beliefs	E.g. "I can't cope with people who 'suck up' and I won't."
C	Consequences	E.g. You ignore Tom because you'll never see eye to eye.

How you transition from A to B is known as your explanatory style, and this is what you can learn to change. It's where personalisation, pervasiveness and permanence occur.

Which ones do you notice in the A B C example?

To relearn your style:

#Be Aware

First be aware of your As and Bs when communicating, especially over a negative issue.

#Confront

Call your cognitive distortions out.

#Replace

Change them for more optimistic thoughts.

Exercise

Here are some examples involving the 3 Ps. Imagine each situation as if it's happening to you. Choose the response that best describes how you would think, and try and apply one of the 3 P labels.

1. You're interviewed for a promotion at work, and get the job.
 - a. I devote much of my time and effort to interview techniques.
 - b. I work extremely hard and that shows through every time I'm asked about my strengths.
2. You forget to call an important client back at the time requested.
 - a. I'm rubbish at time management.
 - b. I was too caught up in preparing the stats for the meeting.
3. You go over time when hosting a conference call at work.
 - a. When I'm multi-tasking, I usually struggle to bring things to a close.
 - b. I was so involved in the call that I forgot about agreeing to end the meeting before lunch.

Wrap

In this lesson you've learned how to change your style of thinking to help bring about more optimism and contentment in your life.

Over the next week, consider situations you've been challenged by recently. Write them down, see if and where any of the 3 Ps come into play. Challenge any negative evaluations by Being Aware – Confronting – and Replacing.

This is the last lesson of our course on Optimistic Thinking.