Learned Optimism

Martin P Seligman - an overview

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Learned Optimism: Notes & Review

Learned Optimism is a positive psychology book. It is important to point out that that is distinct and different from what is popularly know as positive thinking. Read on.

Martin Seligman, the author, explains the difference between optimists and pessimists is in thought patterns, and he teaches how we can become more optimists or, when the situation demands it, how we can strategically think more like pessimists.

Bullet Summary
- Optimists leader longer, healthier, and happier lives
- Optimists achieve more, sell more, win more at sports and win far more political elections
- Optimists and pessimists have distinct explanatory styles around their live's failures and wins
- You can learn to become more of an optimist by learning how to change the way you think (and you can also choose to strategically think more like a pessimist)

Full Summary
About the Author: Martin Seligman is an American psychologist and researcher. He is a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. Seligman has been the president of the American Psychological Association (APA), and he is one of the founders and main proponents of "Positive Psychology".

The 3 Causes of Rampant Depressions in The West

Martin Seligman says that the West is struggling with the highest rates of depression that the world has ever seen.
In this opinion, the root causes are three:

1. **Individualism**: in a society where "I" and personal success matter the most, failing to achieve "success" leads to depression
2. **Collapse of social networks**: personal failures used to be buffered by strong social networks in the past, comprising our families, our nation, our churches, and our communities. But those are disappearing, leaving the individuals lonelier and lonelier
3. **Self-esteem movement**: Roy Baumeister proved that it's high self-esteem that leads to violence, not low self-esteem. Boosting self-esteem without matching skills creates issues, says Seligman

So if boosting self-esteem is a cause of depression and problems, what should one do?

Well, the answer lies in boosting not self-esteem, but optimism.

And that's what "Learned Optimism" is all about: teaching optimism, and how to become more optimisms.

Optimists VS Pessimists: How They Think Differently

Optimists and pessimists think differently along 3 crucial variables:
1. **Time / Permanence:** optimists see loss and rejection as temporary; pessimists see them as permanent
2. **Specificity / Pervasiveness:** optimists see loss and rejection as specific; pessimists see them as universal and as big general rejection to their whole work or personality
3. **Personal / External** optimists see loss and rejection as a consequence of the circumstances; pessimists take the blame on themselves and sees loss or rejection as a rejection of the self

Helplessness: helplessness is the ultimate state of pessimism, and it's the belief that no matter what you do, it will be useless. People in a state of helplessness become apathetic and take no action, *including in situations in which they could change their environment*.

Says Seligman, paraphrased here for brevity:

The defining characteristic of pessimists is that they tend to believe bad events will last a long time, will undermine everything they do, and are their own fault.

The optimists think about misfortune in the opposite way. Defeat is just a temporary setback, confined to this one case, and that it's not their fault: Circumstances, bad luck, or other people brought it about.

Measuring Your Optimism Score

Usually, you will have a good feeling whether you are optimist or pessimist.

If not, there are several different methods to find out whether you're an optimist or a pessimist.

You can take Seligman's optimism test here.

Another method, probably more accurate, is to measure yourself over the course of a few days.

You will record your "ABC", such as:

- **Adversity**: what happened
- **Belief**: what you told yourself, how you interpret the event (first hint: they are not facts, just your own, often too negative interpretation)
- **Consequences**: how you felt, what you tell yourself, and what you did

Example:

- **Adversity**: you ate a cookie during your "no-sugar" diet
- **Belief**: you tell yourself "I just blew my diet", or "I suck", or "I can't stick to things"
- **Consequence**: I felt a loser, and I ended up eating even more cookies

The ABC will also help you to know yourself better and to learn to catch your own thoughts, including the fleeting ones, as they appear daily.

This exercise will provide you with the self-awareness necessary for more effectively changing your thought patterns.

Too Much Optimism VS Too Much Pessimism: What They Mean For You

Can there be such a thing as "too much optimism"?

Yes.

From the quick description above, you can already see that too much optimism, or what Seligman calls "blind optimism", can be a drag to true growth.

If you always refuse to take the blame, you will never fix your mistakes and you will never grow.

But as we will see later, one can embrace optimism without sacrificing true growth and development.

Too much pessimism, on the other hand, is overall bad for you. Seligman (paraphrased for brevity):

Judiciously employed, mild pessimism has its uses.
But if we habitually believe that misfortune is our fault, is enduring, and will undermine everything we do, more of it will befall us than if we believe otherwise. I am also convinced that if we are in the grip of this view, we will get depressed easily, we will accomplish less than our potential, and we will even get physically sick more often. Pessimistic prophecies are self-fulfilling

In short: mild pessimism deployed strategically can help us grow.
But heavy doses of pessimism spread throughout our lives will only make us sadder, and less effective.

You Can *Choose* To Think More Optimistically or Pessimistically
Habits of thoughts must not be either-or.
You don't have to necessarily always think like a pessimist, or like an optimist.
If you are generally pessimistic, then you can start adopting the thought patterns of an optimist.
And you can choose to strategically think more like a pessimist when evaluating true risk becomes crucial for intelligent decision-making.

Optimism As Personal Power
Remember that the ultimate state of pessimism is one where you don't believe any of your actions matter?
Well, when you have that type of mindset, you feel powerless.
On the other hand, when you optimistically think that your actions *do* matter, you feel more in power.
However, you also are more powerful for the simple fact of taking more action.
Because there are events in which you have no control whatsoever. And some in which you have 100% control. But there are a lot of events over which you have a limited amount of control. When you seek to control those variables, your personal power increases, and you exert more influence over your environment.
Says Seligman:

Many things in life are beyond our control (…) But there is a vast, unclaimed territory of actions over which we can take control—or cede control to others or to fate.
The way we think about this realm of life can actually diminish or enlarge the control we have over it.

When you think optimistically, you are more likely to influence the world and get what you want, and that's the definition of power.

Optimism Is An Antidote Against Failure, & The Trait of Resilience

How you explain events matters a lot.
It matters because, says Seligman, a failure makes everyone at least momentarily helpless.
But to the optimist, it's a momentary failure, and "tomorrow it's another day".
For the pessimist, the failure lingers, and it prevents them from going forward and trying again.

- **Permanence**: it determines for how long a person stops trying
- **Pervasiveness**: it determines what areas of one's life the failure will affect
- **Personalisation**: people who blame themselves will have lower self-esteem, while people who blame external events have a resilient self-esteem in the face of failures

Hope depends on permanence and pervasiveness, and they are the most important dimensions because they determine whether or not you will try again.

Says Seligman:
Finding temporary and specific causes for misfortune is the art of hope. Finding permanent and universal causes for misfortune is the practice of despair.

Depression and Its Causes: How People Get Depressed (& How to Cure It)
Seligman starts with a quick history of depression:

How Depression Was Understood & Cured

Historically, depression was explained in just to ways: psychoanalytic, and biomedical.

The Freudian / psychoanalytic had little evidence and it's been proven wrong.

The biomedical is partly true: some depressions are the consequences of mental imbalances and poor functioning brains and are, to some extent, inherited. The typical cures of drugs and electroconvulsive therapy ("shock treatment") are quick and moderately effective.

The problem with the biomedical explanations is that it generalises from a small number of hard-core, inherited patients, to the general population of depressed individuals who might not even need any external help or drugs.

Says Seligman:
The antidepressant drugs are as good an example of our overmedicated society as the use of tranquilizers to bring peace of mind or hallucinogens to see beauty.

Curing Depression Through Learned Optimism

Depression and learned helplessness are very similar, says Seligman.

And, for most people, depression is not a matter of genes, but a consequence of thought patterns.

The two most important ones being:
1. **Learned helplessness**: it's the giving up based on the belief that you have no power to change anything around you. Uncontrollable events, failures, and bad explanatory styles after failures cause learned helplessness
2. **Explanatory styles**: it's the manner in which you habitually explain to yourself why events happen, and it includes the three dimensions we discussed above (time, specificity, personal agency)

Says Seligman:
A failure or a defeat can teach you that you are now helpless, but learned helplessness will produce only momentary symptoms of depression—unless you have a pessimistic explanatory style. If you do, then failure and defeat can throw you into a full-blown depression. On the other hand, if your explanatory style is optimistic,

your depression will be halted.

(…)

Learned helplessness becomes full-blown depression when the person who fails is a pessimist.

You can cure helplessness when you show people that their actions matter, and if you teach them to think differently about their failures.

To "inoculate" against learned helplessness, you must teach people their actions can make a difference.

Similarly, you can cure depression by changing your thinking, which is what Aaron Beck did with cognitive behavioral therapy.

Cognitive therapy, says Seligman, cures depression patients by making them more optimistic.

And once they learn to change their own thought patterns, depressive patients also see fewer relapses, because they learn to cure themselves.

Rumination: The Enabler of Depression

Rumination, or mulling over bad events, is an enabler for depression.

If someone has pessimistic explanatory styles but is action-oriented and does not ruminate, he will avoid depression.

It's when bad explanatory styles combine with rumination, that depression sets in.

Here is how the chain of events unfolds:

1. There is a threat or failure
2. You think you are helpless to do anything about it
3. You see the threat's cause as permanent, pervasive, and personal
4. Consequently, you expect to be helpless in the future, and in many situations
5. You get depressed

The more you are inclined to ruminate, the more you repeat this cycle.

Brooding, or thinking how bad things are, often starts this sequence.

Says Seligman:

Changing either rumination or pessimism helps relieve depression. Changing both helps the most.

Why Women Are More Depressed

Women are twice as likely to be depressed than men are because they tend to act less, and think more about problems (rumination).

Says Seligman:

Men tend to act rather than reflect, but women tend to contemplate their depression, mulling it over and over, trying to analyse it and determine its source. Psychologists call this process of obsessive analysis rumination.

Ruminator by itself only means that people mull over bad events.
But a ruminator can be either optimistic, or pessimistic. It's the pessimistic ones that are in trouble.

The 5 Steps of Cognitive Therapy

1. **Learn to recognise the automatic thoughts** popping in your mind when you feel down. These can be automatic phrases or sentences you repeat so often that can go almost unnoticed (and unchallenged)
2. **Learn to dispute the automatic thoughts** by:
    1. **Finding contrary evidence**: learned optimism, contrary to positive thinking, is grounded in reality. So you should look for evidence contrary to your current negative thoughts and conclusions. The good news is that reactions to negative events are most often overreactions, so most of the times you will have facts and data on your side
    2. **Finding Alternative explanation**: most events have many causes. Pessimists latch onto the nastiest of those possible causes, the ones that paint them in the worst possible light and the ones that pain them the most. By looking at *all* the causes, you get both a more realistic picture, and a less pessimistic one. You can -and probably should- also focus on the causes that you can change, so that you can already start thinking about solutions
    3. **Distract yourself**: you learn how to distract yourself from depressing thoughts and avoid rumination. One simple and neat technique, especially good when you need to focus, is to put off. You can learn to control not only what you think, but when you think it.
    4. **Question the depression-sowing assumptions**: "I can't live without love" or "unless everything I do is perfect, I'm a failure." are the type of premises that set you up for depression. Just as you can change your explanatory styles from pessimistic to

optimistic, you can also choose a new set of more human premises to live by

Optimism Is The Key Ingredient for Tenacity

Yes, optimists achieve more.
Through a series of studies of insurance salespeople at Metropolitan Life, Seligman found out that that the people who performed best were the optimists.
He also found out using CAVE technique analysis of previous statements, that optimistic sports team in both NBA and baseball bounce back more easily from previous defeats and, ultimately, win more.
The same results held true for swimmers and, importantly, **optimist politicians also win more elections**.
Optimism also intersects with a 'growth mindset' researched by Carol Dweck.
With a growth mindset, people believe they can learn and improve through hard work.

When Pessimism is Good
Alright, we got it:
It's better to be an optimist.
But in the beginning, we also said that sometimes "blind optimism" can stunt your growth, and that sometimes pessimism is either warranted, or help you make better decisions.

Says Seligman:
Pessimism may support the realism we so often need.
(…)
Sometimes we need to cut our losses and invest elsewhere rather than find reasons to hold on.
And in some situations—the cockpit of an airliner, for example—what's needed is not an upbeat view but a mercilessly realistic one.

In sum, it's great to become an optimist, but **it's best of all to be able to** *choose* **when to be an optimist and when to be a pessimist**.

So, when should you be a pessimist, and when should you be an optimist? Seligman says it depends on what you're trying to accomplish.

Optimism is green, pessimism is red:

Use optimism:
- When the costs of failure are low
  - Making one more
  - Approaching or not approaching someone
- When you need to a stick to a habit, but you failed in a single instance
- In achievement situations such as selling, writing, winning a game or promotion
- When you want to feel better, or are struggling with depression
- If it's an ongoing issue you can't fix
- [If you want to lead](#) and inspire others

Use pessimism:
- When the costs of failures are high
  - Pilots in the cockpit
  - Tipsy and deciding whether to drive or not
  - Frustrated partner deciding whether to start an affair or not
- You need to plan for a risky or uncertain feature

And, out of emotional intelligence, avoid going too high in optimism when you are comforting or consoling someone (they need to vent first).

A Brief History of Psychology

"Learned Optimism" is a wonderful text for students of psychology as it also provides an overview of the history of psychology.

- **Humans without agency**: Up until the 1960s psychology saw humans as either pushed by internal drives (Freudians), or pulled by external events (Skinner behavioralists and Clark Hull ethologists)
- **1965, the emergence of self-direction**: things began to change in 1965, and four different development helped psychology move beyond Freudian psychoanalysis and Skinner's behaviorism
  1. **Chomsky and generative language**: Noam Chomsky argued that language and human behaviour could originate not from previous reinforcement, but internally. New sentences can be understood and drive new action without any previous

2. **Jean Piaget and children's development**: Jean Piaget showed that we can study how children develop, and what and how they learn will shape their development
3. **Cognitive Psychology**: with the publication of Ulric Neisser's Cognitive Psychology the world started moving towards the working of the inner mind (the initial analogy was with computers as a model, later criticized by evolutionary psychology (Miller, 2000)
4. **Behavioural psychology wake up calls**: researchers found out that drives and needs couldn't by themselves explain all animal and human behaviour, and started to invoke cognitions -or thoughts- to explain complex behaviour

Real-Life Applications

The real-life applications of "Learned Optimism" are life-changing.

- **Learn to switch between optimism and strategic pessimism**

You can decide to think more strategically and focus on the dangers when you need to reach critically important decisions, or think more like an optimist when you need to persevere and/or be happy.

This is a hugely empowering tool to put in your arsenal.