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PSYCHOLOGY

Paper No 9: Positive Psychology

Module No 14: Optimism

1. Learning Outcomes

After studying this module, you shall be able to

- Know more about the constructs of optimism and pessimism
- Identify the various theories of optimism and
- Learn about the benefits of optimism in various domains

2. Introduction

Optimism and pessimism refer to the positive and negative predictions that people make regarding their future. Some people look usually on the bright side of events, while others look on the dark side. Therefore, it can be said that optimists expect good things to happen to them while pessimists expect bad things to happen to them. Many studies have provided evidence for the optimistic bias. Weinstein (1980) asked college students to estimate how their chances of experiencing 42 events would be different from their classmates. Students rated their chances higher for positive events and lower for negative events. Likewise, surveys regarding automobile accidents, crime, and disease have shown that many people report that their risk is less than average of experiencing such events. Very few people say that their risk is more than average.

Between 1975 and 1982, high school seniors in the United States were asked the question, "In the next five years do you think that things in this country will get better or worse?" Results showed that 44% were pessimistic. On being questioned about "things in the rest of the world," 55%-60% were pessimistic. When asked about "things in their own life," only 3%-4% said they thought it would worse; and 80%-90% said they thought it would get better (Smith, 1983).

Optimism has been linked to psychological and physical well-being. The study of optimism has contributed a lot to what we understand about optimism today.

3. Related constructs

There are several other constructs that are similar or related to optimism and they pose a methodological issue. Two of these concepts are hope and self-efficacy.

Bandura (1995) defined self-efficacy as 'the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations'. People with high self-efficacy expectancies believe that their personal efforts determine the outcome of events. Whereas self-efficacy looks at self as a causal agent, optimism takes a broader view of the potential causes at work.

Hope reflects the will as well as the ways. The confidence aspect in hope is similar to optimism however there is more emphasis on personal agency.

Pessimism has been found to resemble the construct of neuroticism. Neuroticism involves a tendency to worry, and experience unpleasant emotions. Therefore, it can be said that a sense of pessimism is a part of neuroticism.

4. Expectancy-Value Models of Motivation

Optimism and pessimism relate to people's expectations for the future. Due to this they are linked to the expectancy-value theories of motivation. Expectancy-value theories assume that behavior is directed on the pursuit of goals. When a goal is important to someone, the greater is its value. Expectancy is a sense of confidence or doubt about whether the goal can be attained or not.

Expectancy-based theories generally suggest that the best prediction of behavior can be made when the level of the expectancy fits that of the behavior being predicted.

When confronting a challenge, optimists are more confident whereas pessimists are more doubtful. This has implications in terms of differences in taking health risks, taking precautions, and being persistent in one's efforts to overcome health threats as well as differences in coping responses.

5. Dispositional Optimism

Dispositional optimism is defined as a global expectation that more good (desirable) things than bad (undesirable) will happen in the future (Scheier and Carver, 1985). Optimism has been found to be associated with greater life satisfaction whereas pessimism has been found to be associated with stress and depression.

Dispositional optimism is associated with various positive outcomes such as better mental and physical health, motivation, performance, and satisfying personal relationships.

Expectancies are measured by asking people whether their future outcomes will be good or bad. They refer to generalized expectancies meaning optimism and pessimism.

For decades psychologists have thought about optimism and pessimism as dispositional traits. However, a complementary approach is to define optimism in relation to some specific time, situation, or domain. Hence, the study of generalized optimism emerges out of specific outcome expectancies. These two ways of thinking about optimism are related to each other. A global tendency to be optimistic can give rise to more specific optimistic beliefs.

Hence, there are two types of optimism: dispositional optimism which is the general expectation that good things will happen while situational optimism which is the expectation that a specific situation will be positive.

6. Explanatory styles

People have explanatory styles which influence the way they explain various life events. According to the theory behind explanatory style, optimism and pessimism are defined by unstable and specific versus stable and global patterns of explanation for negative outcomes.

Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale (1978) applied the attribution theory. This approach believes that people's explanatory style determines how they explain an event. This influences their expectation of future events.

Explanatory style consists of three dimensions: internal/external; stable/unstable and global/specific. According to this model, if the person considers bad events as internal, stable and global they have a pessimistic explanatory style. However, optimistic explanatory style explains the causes of negative events as external, unstable and specific.

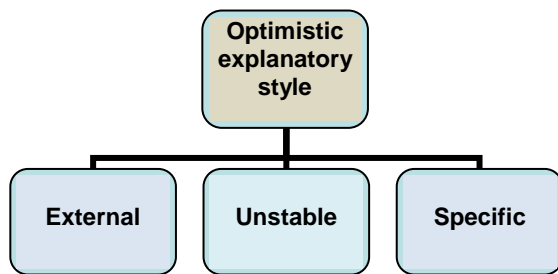


Figure 1 depicting the optimistic explanatory style

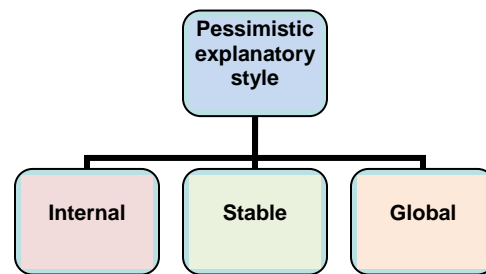


Figure2 depicting the pessimistic explanatory style

Seligman (1991) started a school-based resilience training program called the Penn Resilience Program (PRP) which focuses on the explanatory styles of students. People with pessimistic thinking styles are trained to challenge these beliefs and develop optimistic explanations.

When faced with a challenge, optimists are more confident whereas pessimists remain doubtful.

7. Unrealistic and realistic optimism

Unrealistic optimism (Weinstein, 1989) describes the mismatch between dispositional optimism and actual probability of occurrence of events. It refers to the discrepancy between the inevitability of adverse circumstances and the anticipation of experiencing life as good. Optimistic bias or unrealistic optimism has been demonstrated across a wide variety of positive and negative events.

Realistic optimism is defined by Sneider (2001) as the 'tendency to maintain a positive outlook within the constraints of the available measurable phenomena situated in the physical and social world'. Realistic optimists believe they have more control over themselves, their lives and their destinies. A realistic

optimist is defined as someone who looks on the bright side of life but at the same time has an understanding of reality.

The main difference is between believing that one will succeed, and believing that one will succeed easily. This is the difference between being a realistic optimist and an unrealistic optimist.

8. Importance of optimism

Optimism has been linked to positive mood, academic, and occupational success and good health. Pessimism has been found to be related to depression, failure, social isolation, mortality etc.

8.1 Optimism and Subjective Well-Being

Since optimists are people who expect to have positive outcomes, they usually experience positive feelings. Pessimists expect negative outcomes and therefore they usually have negative feelings of anxiety, guilt, anger etc.

Research related to experiences of people with childbirth, coronary artery bypass surgery, bone marrow transplantation, and the progression of AIDS etc has shown that pessimists experienced more distress after the event than did optimists.

Seligman (1998) reported that optimistic people experience less depression and increased enjoyment in social interactions. Several studies have reported a strong relation between an optimistic outlook about the future and happiness.

8.2 Optimism, Pessimism, and Coping

Optimists and pessimists have been found to use different coping methods.

Optimists use more problem-centered coping than pessimists and a variety of emotion-focused coping techniques as well. Hence, it can be said that optimists have a coping advantage over pessimists. Thus, optimists appear generally to use approach oriented coping strategies, and pessimists tend to use avoidant coping strategies.

In the workplace, optimists use more problem-focused coping than do pessimists like self-control and directed problem solving (Strutton & Lumpkin, 1993). Pessimists use more emotion-focused coping such as escapism, and using social support. In studies of AIDS patients too, optimism has been found to be related to active coping strategies.

8.3 Optimism and Health Behaviors

Optimistic people are healthier and happier. They cope better with stress using more effective coping strategies. They form better social support networks around themselves. They have healthier lifestyles which prevent them from developing illness. If they develop illness they adhere to medical advice and have healthier lifestyle and behavior patterns. Many studies show that optimists report more health-promoting behaviors than pessimists.

The route by which optimism might be associated with better health is through effects on the immune system. It has also been found that optimists suffer fewer life traumas, which make them vulnerable to illness and have better social support.

In spite of the various benefits of optimism mentioned above, several theorists have suggested that in some situations optimism may be potentially damaging.

Optimists may fail to protect themselves against threats. Another possibility is that the optimist's worldview might be more vulnerable to a traumatic event than that of a pessimist.

8.4 Optimism and work performance

When hiring people for jobs three characteristics must be considered: aptitude, motivation and optimism. Working with Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, Seligman (1995) studied optimism in insurance agents. He found that life insurance agents were highly optimistic and that the optimists performed better than pessimists.

9. Changing Pessimism to Optimism

Researches with twins suggest that optimism is subject to genetic influence (Plomin et al., 1992). Optimism relates both to neuroticism and to extraversion, both of which are known to be genetically influenced. An important factor in the development of optimism or pessimism is early childhood experience. Insecurity of adult attachment is related to pessimism.

One of the most straightforward ways for changing pessimism to optimism is through cognitive-behavioral therapies. These are applied to problems such as depression and anxiety. The goal of the cognitive therapies is to make the cognitions more positive thereby reducing distress.

The approaches for changing pessimistic thinking to optimistic are all built on the same principles of "ABCDE" (Seligman, 1992).

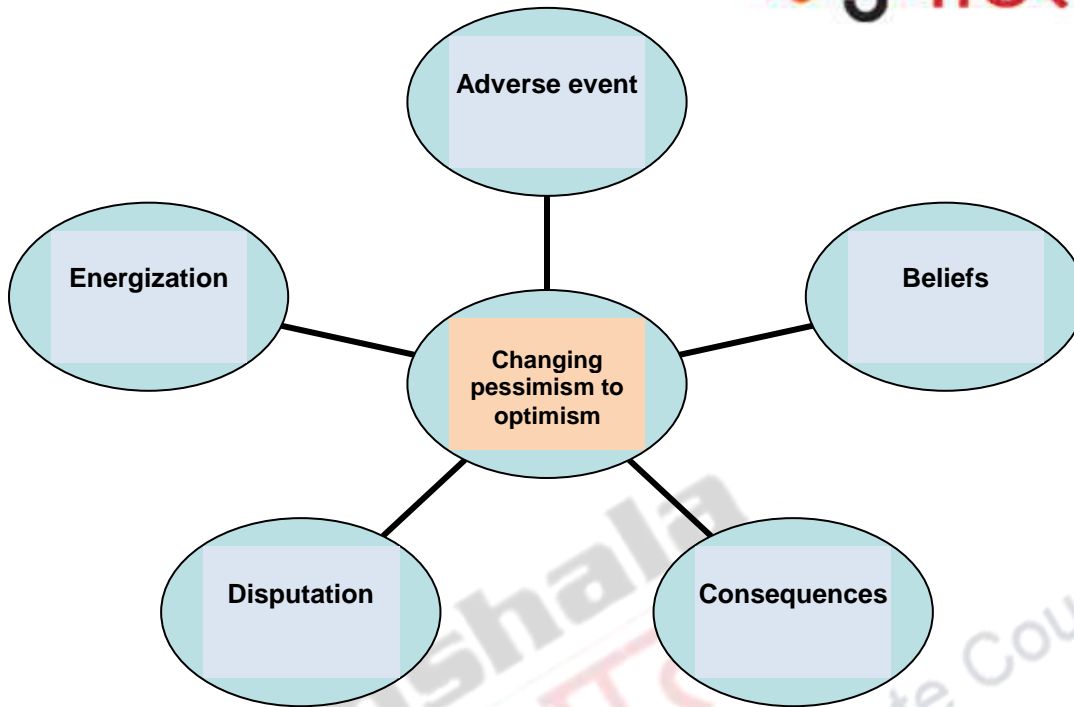


Figure 3 depicting the components involved in changing pessimism to optimism

A - Adverse event or situation- Identifying adverse situations that one routinely faces and writing down the objective descriptions of them.

B- Beliefs about that event- Learning to hear and record the beliefs about those events which come to mind.

C - Consequences of those beliefs-Feeling the consequences of those beliefs and writing them down in terms of emotions and what one did.

D- Disputation and Distraction - Disputing those beliefs or distracting oneself.

E – Energization- Finally, noticing what happens to one’s energy and willingness to act when one disputes the negative beliefs.

Another method for enhancing optimism is personal efficacy training. The focus of such training is on increasing specific kinds of competence by the use of assertiveness training or social skills training. Training in specific areas like problem solving, decision making etc can also improve the level of optimism in a person.

Another method which is frequently used is Instructional Counseling for optimism. In this method, cognitive techniques are used for teaching optimistic beliefs. Another technique which can be used is the ‘What if’ technique. Negative self-talk creates anxiety and reduces happiness. By associating ‘What If’ with positive hopeful outcomes we can experience calm. Relaxation techniques can also be employed.

When faced with adverse situations, one must calm down and try to have positive and optimistic thoughts.

To conclude, optimism and pessimism influence how people perceive and explain events in their lives. They influence people's subjective experiences and actions when they try to deal with problems. However, being optimistic or pessimistic has implications for achievement, mental and physical health, coping and well-being.

10. Summary

- Optimists are people who expect good things to happen to them while pessimists are people who expect bad things to happen to them.
- The concepts of optimism and pessimism are related to people's expectations for the future and are related to the expectancy-value theories of motivation.
- Dispositional optimism is defined as a global expectation that more good (desirable) things than bad (undesirable) will happen in the future
- The explanatory styles approach to optimism assumes that people's expectancies for the future come from their view of the causes of events in the past.
- Optimism is related to higher subjective well-being, problem focused coping, healthy lifestyles and better work performance.
- Cognitive-behavioral techniques are very useful in changing from optimism to pessimism.