[Happiness in this World](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/happiness-in-world)

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How Optimism Can Be Learned

The answer isn't by aiming to be more optimistic.

[Optimism](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/optimism), it turns out, isn't just defined as the tendency to expect things to turn out better than probability predicts, nor is [pessimism](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/pessimism) defined only as the tendency to expect things to turn out more poorly. Both terms are also used to describe the way we think about the *causes of adversity*, pessimism in particular being defined as the tendency to think about them in a way that makes us feel powerless. A pessimistic *self-explanatory style*, then, describes the tendency to attribute the causes of adversity to forces that are internal ("This is all my fault"), universal ("This affects absolutely everything"), and immutable ("This isn't changeable").

Not surprisingly, numerous studies show that possessing such a pessimistic self-explanatory style places us at an extreme disadvantage, mostly by preventing us from responding to adversity in ways that make it easier to surmount. Telling ourselves, for example, that we failed a test because we lack good test-taking skills—meaning that we lack inherent ability—may discourage us from preparing for a makeup test, leading us to fail it again. On the other hand, if we tell ourselves we failed a test because we didn't study enough—meaning we didn't make the effort, something over which we have significant control—we’re more likely to redouble our efforts the second time around and pass it. In other words, if we spend our energy defending a rationale for why we can’t do something, we’ll almost certainly not be able to do it. As Richard Bach writes in his book *Illusions*, "Argue for your limitations, and sure enough, they’re yours."

Bottom of Form

People with a pessimistic self-explanatory style are also at an increased risk for developing posttraumatic [stress](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/stress) and depression when adversity strikes—as well as for losing their [motivation](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/motivation) when they fail. In one study, psychologist Martin Seligman asked swimmers to swim their best stroke and then told them their times were slightly slower than they actually were. When they swam again, swimmers with an optimistic self-explanatory style swam at approximately the same speed, whereas swimmers with a pessimistic self-explanatory style swam more slowly. When things are going well—when the [team](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/teamwork) on which we’re playing is winning, for example—no difference in motivation or performance exists between optimists and pessimists. But when things aren't going well—when the team on which we’re playing is losing—pessimists often stop trying.

Or, at least, some do. It turns out that not all pessimists are created equal.*Depressive* pessimists, research suggests, believe they lack the necessary ability to succeed and therefore that their efforts are irrelevant. *Defensive*pessimists, on the other hand, worry about negative outcomes as well but use their anxiety to motivate themselves into action. Interestingly, defensive pessimism—acknowledging the possibility of failure without allowing it to discourage us from making the efforts necessary to prevent it—may represent the most adaptive self-explanatory style of all: in one study of female basketball players, subjects identified as defensive pessimists outperformed even optimists.

What explains such a counterintuitive result? One possibility is that a*blindly* optimistic self-explanatory style might lead to overconfidence and therefore carelessness, an idea supported by the finding in the study above that subjects with an optimistic self-explanatory style garnered more fouls than those with a pessimistic self-explanatory style. Another is that a blindly optimistic self-explanatory style might actually promote a *reduction*in effort as we might not try as hard if we believe our ability eliminates the need. Finally, a blindly optimistic self-explanatory style might cause us to overlook the true reasons for our performing poorly—for example, because we’re poorly conditioned—and thus prevent us from improving at the same rate as our defensively pessimistic peers.

Given these potential pitfalls, a more constructive approach might be instead to develop what psychologists call *explanatory flexibility*, a willingness to reformulate how we think about the causes of negative events, abandoning even optimistic narratives when information that contradicts them comes to light. How, then, do we develop such flexibility—a *realistic* optimistic self-explanatory style—remaining balanced in the way we evaluate the causes of negative life events without surrendering our sense of power and control over them?

If we tend toward a *blindly* optimistic self-explanatory style, we need to become more aware of the inclination we have to blanket optimistic explanatory [biases](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/bias) over all situations equally and acknowledge when the causes of negative events really are outside our control. On the other hand, if we tend toward a *depressively* pessimistic self-explanatory style, we need to practice refuting self-defeating views. For such practice does indeed work. In one study designed to evaluate the effects of self-administered optimism training, researcher David Fresco and colleagues asked subjects to identify both the best and worst events they experienced over thirty days and to offer explanations for their causes. Half of the subjects were then asked to offer revised explanations. (Hoping to make the training as simple as possible, the researchers asked subjects to look not for more *optimistic* explanations but merely for *alternative* ones, presuming that further reflection would yield more optimistic thinking as a natural consequence.) Surprisingly, at first the subjects produced revised explanations that were even *more* pessimistic than the ones they offered initially. But by the end of the study, apparently with enough repetition, both their initial *and* revised explanations had become less pessimistic than those of the control group.

But does changing our self-explanatory style actually make a difference in outcomes? The answer, in some contexts at least, is yes. In one study, training male basketball players to attribute positive results—for example, making a free throw—to their *ability* and negative results to their *lack of effort* was found to significantly improve their subsequent performance. In another study, optimism training was found to increase the persistence with which novice golfers attempted to improve their game. Thus, how we explain the causes of our problems (like failing to make a putt) almost certainly plays an important role in determining how we respond to them. Which is to say, the stories we tell ourselves about why bad things happen really do affect what happens next.