

How Can We Become More Optimistic About the Future?

Description

We like to think that the world around us makes sense. That there is a logical reason why things happen the way they do. So we instinctively explain the day's events in terms of cause and effect (psychologists call these attributions).

Say someone cuts us off in traffic.

Sheesh, what a jerk, we say.

Or, if we are in the mood to give them the benefit of the doubt, we say gee, maybe they were rushing their kid to the hospital...

The interesting thing about these attributions is that they affect how we feel, and subsequently, how we act.

Let's say for instance, that you just heard back from a festival you've been dying to attend for years, but...the news isn't good.

How do you explain this to yourself?

A tale of two stories

Story A: Crap, I'm probably not going to get into any festivals this summer. Everyone's going to think I'm a loser, I'm not going to be able to land any gigs, and I'm going to [end up living in a van down by the river](#). I thought I was getting better, but I must have been fooling myself. Maybe I'm not cut out for this after all.

Story B: Crap, that sucks. I know I played pretty darn well; maybe the faculty just have different tastes and are looking for a different kind of player. I auditioned for a variety of places, so I'm sure I'll be a good fit somewhere. But no matter what happens I know I've improved a lot this year, and as long as I keep working hard and putting myself out there, I gotta believe that gigs and other opportunities will open up even if the festivals don't come calling this year.

Can we know with 100% certainty which of these stories is objectively true? Nope. But regardless of what's "true," the story we habitually choose to tell ourselves will become internalized and influence our confidence, motivation, and future actions.

How so?

Our explanatory style

Consider how you feel when you tell yourself Story A.

Discouraged? Like quitting? Like going home, putting on your PJ's, and eating Chinese food right out of the container while watching some depressing movie you've never heard of on Netflix?

What about Story B?

Disappointed, sure. But more at peace with the outcome? Perhaps a little frustrated or ticked off and motivated to work harder? More determined to get back up, dust yourself off, and prove to yourself that you have what it takes?

These stories we tell ourselves (or **explanatory style**, as psychologists like to say) are largely responsible for how optimistic or pessimistic we are – which influences our willingness to persevere in the face of inevitable roadblocks.

In music as in sports, setbacks and disappointments are virtually guaranteed. So if we want to keep our confidence up, keep moving forward, and get where we want to go, it helps to develop a more optimistic explanatory style.

The three P's

Explanatory styles are comprised of three elements – **permanence** (are things always going to be this way?), **pervasiveness** (is it going to be like this in every area of my life?), and **personalization** (is there something wrong with me?).

Permanence

The musician with an optimistic explanatory style will tend to assume that successes will repeat themselves, and that setbacks are isolated cases or exceptions to the rule. e.g. "I know I'll do better next time"

The musician with a pessimist explanatory style will tend to assume that success was a fluke. That if they have a history of choking in auditions, they will return to their old pattern soon enough. e.g. "I always screw up at important auditions"

Pervasiveness

The optimistic musician will tend to assume that good things in one area will spread to other areas – for instance, that if one excerpt goes well, the others are going to go well too. Or that if they are rejected from one festival, this has nothing to do with their chances at being accepted into other festivals.

The pessimistic musician will tend to generalize the one failure across all other areas – that they will experience rejection at the other festivals, fail to gain entry into competitions, lose out on good gigs, see teaching prospects dry up, get a flat tire in the rain, get dumped by their significant other, return home to find that their dog has run away, and [end up living in a van down by the river](#).

Personalization

The musician with an optimistic explanatory style will give themselves credit for successes (“I worked hard for this”) and attribute setbacks to forces they could not control (“The panel was looking for a different type of player” or “The winner really must have brought their A game today”).

The musician with a pessimistic explanatory style will avoid taking credit for successes, attributing these bright spots to luck or favorable circumstances (“Judges were easy to please; there weren’t many good players auditioning today”). Meanwhile, they will readily blame themselves and their perceived weaknesses for any and all failures.

A caveat

Keep in mind that it’s not helpful to simply dismiss *all* setbacks either. There is often much we can learn from bumps in the road, and turning a blind eye to areas needing improvement can be just as detrimental to our future as kicking ourselves when we’re down.

What we’re going for is a more balanced view, where we learn everything we possibly can from setbacks, but always remain focused on a brighter future.

Take action

What is your explanatory style? That of an optimist? Or a pessimist?

Begin paying attention to how you explain the successes and setbacks in your life. See where you fall in the three P’s above. Try out a different story for a change.

I think you’ll find that your explanatory style is a bit of a habit, and that we can really change how we feel moving forward, if we can just open our eyes to the possibility of a slightly more optimistic story.

The one-sentence summary

“It’s like everyone tells a story about themselves inside their own head. Always. All the time. That story makes you what you are. We build ourselves out of that story.” ~[Patrick Rothfuss](#) (writer)

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