

Learned Optimism

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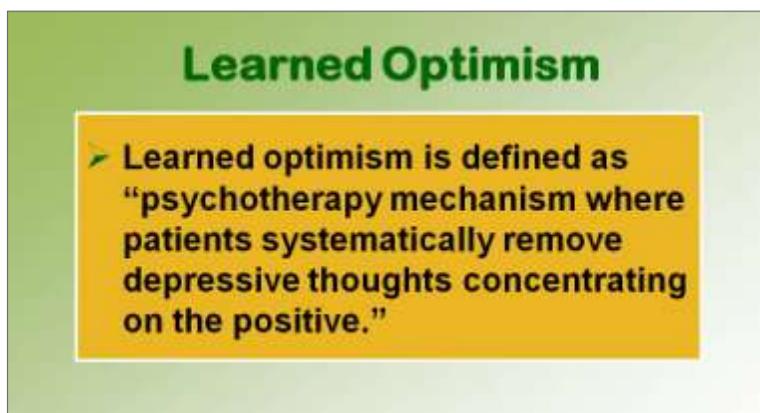
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Definition of Learned Optimism

These tendencies toward negative or positive perceptions are generally referred to as optimism and pessimism. The following definition of learned optimism was retrieved from <http://psychologydictionary.org/learned-optimism/>



One of key things to remember about our tendencies to be optimistic or pessimistic is that we can, through critical self-reflection, challenge our attributions and replace negative thinking patterns with positive ones. Optimists have a stronger belief that they are in control of, or have some control in, situations and that their actions can influence the outcomes. They are more highly motivated to achieve because they have the opportunity to influence the results. Pessimists feel less in control or feel like they have no control at all over the outcomes, hence they question why they should even try.

Optimists are more successful at becoming self-directed learners because their thinking is future-oriented based on past experiences of success. Since optimists feel a sense of control, the decisions they make and actions they take can be controlled by them to maximize their potential for achieving future goals. Pessimists, based on past experiences of failure, or lack of success in controlling situations, view the future as merely a continuation of past performance, thereby diminishing any sense of hope that outcomes will change because of their efforts. This is also crucial in students' ability to envision, prepare for and realize their future selves.

Optimists have a strong sense of self-efficacy. They believe in their ability to set goals and achieve specific tasks. The success they experience in completing these goals builds their confidence and self-concept and increases their motivation to achieve at higher levels. Self-confidence leads to decisive decision-making and persistence in working to successfully complete tasks. Pessimists do not think very highly of their ability to succeed at specific tasks, let alone achieve their life's goals. They lack confidence in themselves and will avoid trying to achieve at higher levels simply because they do not believe they can.

The opposite of learned optimism is learned helplessness, a theory that suggests that the feeling of helplessness can become a learned trait, and once a person has accepted their helpless state, they can remain trapped by the negative attributions they keep using to explain why things are happening to them. When students feel they have no control over their lives or their happiness and feel they are incapable of performing tasks, it can lead to low self-esteem and depression and severely diminish their motivation and desire to achieve.

Learned Optimism is Fundamental to a CBA

It is clear that optimists have a more positive view of life and a deeper sense of accomplishment and self-fulfillment. From a school counseling perspective, it is the responsibility of school counselors to help students critically self-reflect on their thinking processes and behavior patterns, examine the attributions they make about their ability and performance, and develop plans to improve these processes and patterns in ways that replace negative self-attributions with positive ones.

Optimists feel more personal responsibility that bad things are temporary or isolated and that good things will continue to happen. Pessimists are negative thinkers, which things are their own fault and that bad things will continue to happen to them. From what we have learned about the causal dimension of attributions, school counselors can reinforce students' self-esteem by focusing on self-confidence and high expectations and learning how to construct attributions that are internal, unstable and controllable. The capacity to learn optimism depends on openness to change and a willingness to expend effort to look at one's circumstances and the world around them in more positive ways. School counselors can communicate optimistic and controllable attributions, such as giving positive feedback to students on what they do well and helping them understand what they can do to improve their learning outcomes.

Additional Resources Related to Learned Optimism

The Internet is a wonderful tool for accessing information on just about any topic. It has been invaluable in helping us to identify what research has demonstrated to be strongly related to students' academic achievement and well-being, and evidence-based practices that provide

concrete examples of how to translate the research findings into meaningful learning opportunities that support student development.



Staying informed about what works and does not work to help students achieve and succeed is one of the defining characteristics of a professional school counselor. Internet search engines can be used to develop a deeper understanding of the topics discussed on the CBA Website. To get you started, here are some additional resources you may find helpful. These resources, however, only scratch the surface of what is available on the Internet or in published books and articles. We encourage you to use search engines to find more resources that will increase your understanding and build your capacity to apply these ideas in your work as school counselors.

Videos

A video review by Brian Johnson of a book on learned optimism by Dr. Martin Seligman, a leading researcher in the field of positive psychology.

<https://youtu.be/Me9TI9JhvZw>

Dr. Charisse Nixon discusses learned helplessness which is an important notion to understand when studying learned optimism.

<https://youtu.be/gFmFOmprTt0>

A YouTube video by Dr. Lance Luria from The Mercy Channel on learned optimism vs. learned helplessness.

<https://youtu.be/rHEu9bGFTNs>

A video by Courtney Clark on “Do You Know Your Attributional Style?” In this video she discusses optimism and pessimism as attribution styles.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mpNpIZnytW>

Websites

A discussion of optimism from Positive Psychology Resources, viewed from the perspective of confidence and well-being.

<http://www.centreforconfidence.co.uk/pp/overview.php?p=c2lkPTQmdGlkPTAmaWQ9N>
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An article on “Learned Optimism: Tips for Teaching Teenagers to Be Positive.”

<http://www.brighthubeducation.com/high-school-teaching-tips/23956-optimism-lesson-plan/>