

Learned Optimism Following Trauma

Objective

To practice strategies for becoming more optimistic, including applying the “ABCDE” technique.

What to Know

Optimism is an attitude characterized by hope and confidence in success and a positive future. It is the belief, faith, and self-assurance that more good things than bad things will happen in your life. When difficult things happen, optimists accept the challenge and choose to identify both resources and skills that can help them cope.

People who experience trauma and believe they have the skills to cope have a more positive outlook on life. Positive morale leads to perseverance, effective problem-solving, and healthy coping.

Learned optimism refers to developing the ability to view the world from a positive point of view. By challenging negative self-talk and replacing pessimistic thoughts with more positive ones, you can learn to become more optimistic.

- **Failure and success.** Optimists take failures and setbacks in stride. Pessimists tend to see everything – especially a challenging or negative event – as a conspiracy against them. While an optimist will always think of at least one positive reason why they should do something, a pessimist thinks of ten reasons against doing it.
- **Permanence.** Optimists believe negative or difficult events are temporary rather than permanent. They bounce back quickly from failure. Pessimists may take longer to recover – or they may never recover – and generalize while pointing to permanent causes.
- **Pervasiveness.** Optimists know how to handle helplessness, while pessimists believe that a problem in one area of life means their whole life will be ruined. Optimists allow positive events to generalize to other areas of their lives.
- **Personalization.** Optimists are confident and think critically, exploring what can be done for the better and how things can improve. Pessimists blame themselves and resort to helplessness.

This worksheet will help you practice strategies for becoming more optimistic.

What to Do

Here are some ideas to practice being more optimistic.

- 1. Create a “movie” of your best life.** Include specific details, like how you look, how you feel, how you behave, where you live, and what you are doing. Spend time in your safe place every day and play this movie in your mind. This simple mental training exercise might boost your mood and influence the way you think and feel about yourself and the possibilities for your life.
- 2. Self-nurture with the Inner Advocate.** As your Inner Critic starts talking, let out your Inner

Advocate, a powerful ally who believes in you, promotes you, supports you, protects you, and empowers you. Talk to yourself in the second person. Say things like, “You can do this. You are a good person. You easily make friends,” and so on. You might recall a role model who inspired you. Ask yourself, “What would _____ do and say?”

3. Write down your daily “done wells.” Recognize what you did well every day and congratulate yourself. Take a few moments every day to write about what you did well. Get in the habit of rewarding yourself, which reinforces optimism.

4. Nurture a healthy body. Optimism is easier when you feel good. Factors that interfere with having a healthy body include lack of sleep, poor eating habits, self-destructive behaviors, too little exercise, and too much stress. If you know your priorities and goals, be disciplined and “train” for them like a professional athlete. Be sure to include rest days!

5. Look for improvement and take small steps. For example, running around the block may seem small when your goal is to finish a marathon, but it is a small step in the right direction.

6. Minimize difficulties to progress. Become aware of the obstacles you may encounter. Sort them into categories: internal, external, people, situations, and so on. Do not ignore obstacles, simply look at them from a different perspective. Change your strategy and discover what you need to overcome them.

7. Focus on solutions. If you start to obsess about a problem, stop, take a break, do a U-turn, and replace problem-focused thinking with solution-focused thinking.

8. Use the ABCDE Model. According to Martin Seligman, anyone can learn optimism. He developed a simple method to respond to adversity.

Adversity – the challenging event

Belief – how you interpret the event

Consequences – the feelings and actions that result from the beliefs

Disputation – find evidence to argue or debate your interpretation of the event

Energization – follows a successful dispute

Here are the steps to follow:

- understand your current reaction and interpretation of an adverse event
- keep a journal for two days in which you note adverse events and the beliefs and consequences that followed
- return to the journal to highlight pessimism so you can dispute it
- dispute your interpretation by creating “counterevidence” to the negative beliefs
- successful disputation usually leads to energization, when you actively celebrate the process

Describe an adverse situation you recently experienced. Be specific and stick to the facts.

What were the very first words you said to yourself? What did you think?

How did it make you feel? What did you do? Be specific.

Match the consequences with the beliefs. Do they match?

There may be evidence that contradicts your beliefs. Write them down.

Describe the adverse event from a different angle. Are there discrepancies with your first description?

What positive effects did disputation have on you? Make a list.

What will you do the next time you find yourself in a similar situation?

Reflections on This Exercise

Did this exercise help you become more optimistic? Why or why not?

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not at all helpful, to 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
