

Optimistic Thinking Style

 Mindset

 Exercise

 5 min/day

 Client

 No

Optimistic thinking involves relatively stable, favorable expectations and outcomes for the future [1]. Such a thinking style does not need to involve excessive positivity or the rejection of unpleasant emotions; rather, it reflects the way we think about the *causes* of our experiences [2]. Individuals interpret 'good' and 'bad' events according to three factors: *Personalization* - whether they see the cause of the event as internal or external; *Permanence* - whether they believe an outcome is permanent or temporary; and *Pervasiveness* - whether they see the event as having a more global effect on their lives, irrespective of context, or whether it is relevant to just one specific situation [3].

Pessimistic thinkers are more likely to attribute the causes of positive events to external, temporary circumstances with no lasting effect confined to a specific area of their lives [2]. On the other hand, optimistic thinkers tend to view a positive event as a result of their abilities. They believe this event will have a permanent and lasting effect with a global effect on other spheres of life [2].

The cultivation of an optimistic thinking style has myriad benefits. Optimistic thinking is associated with greater life satisfaction, improved health habits and longevity, and reduced feelings of helplessness, for instance [4]. Moreover, an optimistic thinking style is significantly associated with better coping strategies, higher levels of motivation and achievement [2], and better physical and mental health outcomes [6]. Indeed, among those diagnosed with breast cancer, individuals with optimistic thinking styles experience less distress, and they are less likely to engage in avoidance or denial strategies and generally more hopeful about the future [4].

It is important to note that while optimistic thinking has numerous benefits, it can also be problematic. When exercised unrealistically, optimism may develop into a reality-avoidance strategy whereby the individual is attuned to self-delusions and idealism [7]. Optimistic thinking should not be blind to certain feelings and authentic human emotional experiences. Rather it should be flexible, allowing us to draw upon pessimism's keen sense of reality when required [2].

Fortunately, a flexible, optimistic thinking style can be developed and enhanced through practice, allowing us to learn to view our experiences from a more positive perspective. This exercise will help clients cultivate an optimistic thinking style by strengthening the belief that they make good things happen (*personalization*), that the good will remain (*permanence*) and create positive ripples in other areas of their life (*pervasiveness*).



Author

This tool was created by Elaine Houston.



Goal

The goal of this exercise is to help clients develop an optimistic thinking style. By learning to explain positive events as personal (internal), permanent (stable), and pervasive (global), clients will strengthen the belief that they make good things happen and that the good will remain and have positive ripples in many areas of life.



Advice

- While an optimistic thinking style is generally a positive characteristic for individuals to develop, it is important to emphasize that it may come with potential pitfalls. For instance, toxic positivity, unrealistic optimism, and excessive optimism can lead people to focus excessively on positive feelings and experiences while ignoring the negative. This exercise is not about excessive optimism, staying positive, or avoiding/repressing 'negative' experiences and emotions. Nor is it concerned with ignoring problems or pretending that life is perfect. Rather, it is about developing a healthy and realistic approach to optimistic thinking that allows clients to acknowledge and cope with less positive situations.
- Optimism can be learned through attention and practice. It is therefore essential that clients regularly practice this exercise - optimistic thinking will not develop overnight. Clients should be encouraged to return to this exercise whenever they have positive (or better than expected) experiences - no matter how small or insignificant they may appear.
- A completed example of the Optimistic Thinking Style worksheet can be found in Appendix B.



References

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4. Scheier, M. F., Carver, C. S., & Bridges, M. W. (2001). Optimism, pessimism, and psychological well-being. In E. C. Chang (Ed.), *Optimism & pessimism: Implications for theory, research, and practice* (pp. 189-216). American Psychological Association.
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Optimistic Thinking Style

Thinking optimistically does not mean ignoring the negative parts of life or pretending to be happy all the time. Instead, when something good happens, people with an optimistic thinking style explain the experience in a specific way: they think about what *they* did to make something good happen, they expect continued success in the future and consider the ways that these experiences lead to more good things in other spheres of life.

For example, imagine you receive praise from your employer. If you were to think positively about this event, you would see it as being caused by your abilities; therefore, you would believe that more positive things are likely to happen in the future and that the experience will lead to other good things.

People who think optimistically tend to experience less stress and cope with it better, are more resilient, have more rewarding and successful careers, and tend to be healthier and live longer than those who are more pessimistic. We are not all naturally inclined to think about our experiences optimistically, but the good news is that optimistic thinking can be learned through practice. This exercise will help you recognize that *you* can make good things happen and that the good will remain and continue to affect other areas of your life positively.

You may use the worksheet in Appendix A to complete this exercise.

Step 1: Notice the good

This step is about paying attention when things are good - or less bad than you thought. These do not need to be exceptionally good or positive things - just simple, everyday experiences. You should also consider things that have improved for you or things that went better than you expected.

For one week, at the end of each day, set aside some quiet time to ask yourself the following question:

What good things happened today?

On the Optimistic Thinking worksheet in Appendix A, make a note of the good - or better than expected - experiences you had throughout the day. Briefly describe the event under "Positive Event" on the worksheet provided.

Tip: If the situation allows, you may also record these experiences as they happen so that each event is fresh in your mind as you complete the exercise.

Step 2: Giving yourself credit

Do you give yourself credit for making good things happen in your life? Optimistic thinkers believe that good things occur because of their abilities and effort. For example, "I passed the test because I studied hard and I'm good at biology," "I have always been skilled at learning new instruments," or "I got promoted because of my abilities - I am great at my job."



For the events you listed in the previous step, think about your strengths and skills and your part in making this happen. For each event, take some time to consider the following question:

How did my strengths and abilities influence this positive event?

Write your responses in the corresponding section of the Optimistic Thinking worksheet.

Step 3: Expect this to last

Optimistic thinkers believe that the good things they experience will be long-lasting - they expect continued success and that the outcome can be repeated in the future. For example, "Passing the math test means that I will have similar success in math tests in the future."

Take a few moments to consider the following question:

Why are similar events in the future also likely to turn out well?

On the Optimistic Thinking worksheet, write your responses for each event detailed in step 1.

Step 4: Look beyond this event

Optimistic thinkers believe that when something good happens, it is likely to influence other areas of life positively. In other words, they generalize it to other experiences. For example: "This shows I am good at exams and will also pass exams in other subjects." Here, the optimistic thinker applied the conclusion based on one test to all subjects.

For each event described in step 1, consider the following question:

What positive effect will this have on other spheres of my life?

Write your responses in the corresponding section of the Optimistic Thinking worksheet.

Step 5: Reflection

- How did it feel to notice the everyday good things you experience?
- How did it feel to give yourself credit for the good things that happened?
- How do you feel now compared to when you began the exercise?
- In what ways has this exercise helped you understand the value of optimistic thinking?
- What insights have you gained from completing this exercise?



Appendix A: Optimistic Thinking Worksheet

OPTIMISTIC THINKING
<p>Positive event:</p>
<p>1. How did my strengths and abilities influence this positive event?</p>
<p>2. Why are similar events in the future also likely to turn out well?</p>
<p>3. What positive effect will this have on other spheres of my life?</p>



Appendix B: Completed Examples of the Optimistic Thinking Worksheet

Example 1

OPTIMISTIC THINKING
Positive event: <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ <i>I ran a 5k in my fastest time yet.</i>
1. How did my strengths and abilities influence this positive event? <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ <i>I've been training hard and put in the work to beat my personal best.</i>
2. Why are similar events in the future also likely to turn out well? <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ <i>I am a proficient runner and tend to be good at athletics.</i>
3. What positive effect will this have on other spheres of my life? <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ <i>I have never been fitter or felt more confident than I do now and, because of the improvement in my time, I have qualified to compete in a local race.</i>

Example 2

OPTIMISTIC THINKING
Event: <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ <i>My manager said I did a great job on a work task today.</i>
1. How did my strengths and abilities influence this positive event? <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ <i>I performed well on this project because I can prioritize well to get the work done.</i>
2. Why are similar events in the future also likely to turn out well? <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ <i>I excel at these kinds of projects, and I'm always good at them, so that will probably continue in the future.</i>
3. What positive effect will this have on other spheres of my life? <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ <i>This shows I am good at my job, and I'm more likely to be entrusted with other important projects - this means I'm more likely to be put forward for promotion.</i>