

Learned Optimism: An alternative approach to the half empty glass

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"Is the glass half empty or half full?"

In a legal environment, and in all walks of life, it can prove difficult to overcome our negative thoughts when faced with challenging situations. How we respond to challenges can often affect not only ourselves, but our relationships with our family and friends. We are either labelled, "pessimistic" or "optimistic" and these terms are loosely used to define who we are as an individual.

At any stage in your life, you may have been asked the question "is this glass half empty or half full?" Your response will apparently define your perception of life in its entirety. What may be described as proverbial nonsense by some, and a source of philosophical genius by others, is supposed to provide you and others insight about your personality and your optimistic or pessimistic perceptions. A view that the glass is half empty suggests the personality of a pessimist, and the view that the glass is half full deems you an optimist.

EXPLANATORY STYLE: OPTIMISTIC OR PESSIMISTIC

Explanatory styles can be determined by assessing a person's level of permanence, pervasiveness and personalisation. A *pessimist* often views bad events as pervasive, permanent and uncontrollable. Whereas an *optimist* will tend to perceive events as local, temporary and changeable.

To put this in to context, the example below will explore the explanatory style of two solicitors, Benjamin and Michael in their unsuccessful civil claim.

Benjamin and Michael are both acting for the Plaintiff, James Door in a litigious dispute. After 14 months of negotiations, settlement attempts, and long nights preparing for trial, the trial finalises and the Judge delivers her decision.

Both Benjamin and Michael are unsuccessful in their claim.



Benjamin is a pessimist, and Michael is an optimist.

Their responses to what can be described as an aversive situation can be explored through their respective explanatory styles.

- **Permanence:** Are the bad things that happen permanent?
Benjamin: "I'll never win a case"
Michael: "It was only this case I did not win"
- **Pervasiveness:** How does a setback in one area of your life influence other areas?
Benjamin: "this ruins everything, what is the point in me pursuing my career in law anymore or anything at all"
Michael: "this is an undesirable work outcome, but does not impact other aspects of my life"
- **Personalisation:** Do you blame yourself or others for your suffering?
Benjamin: "I wasn't good enough"
Michael: "The Defendant had a stronger case"

UNDERSTANDING LEARNED OPTIMISM

Learned Optimism is a response to the proverb "is the glass half empty or half full?" and provides a solution by altering

the way we perceive events by conditioning our minds.

It is the idea that you can *learn to be optimistic and cultivate your own happiness*.

Unlike many personal qualities, basic pessimism is not fixed and unchangeable – you are not doomed to think negatively forever. The beautiful thing about the brain is we can modify our thoughts and train our brains to think in a particular way. In order to overcome pessimism, and master the skill of optimism, you can learn a set of skills that allow you to use optimism when you choose. These set of skills form the basis of "Learned Optimism".

By adopting an optimistic response to events, you will be better equipped with tools to overcome depression and increase your level of resilience to adverse events.

Optimism serves many benefits in all aspects of our lives including overall better health, happier relationships, increased productivity in your personal and work life, an increased life span, and an overall increased sense of happiness.

Given all these benefits, why would you not want that?

Be Optimistic, Be Happy.