

The Journey To Excellence

<http://www.journeytoexcellence.org.uk/resourcesandcpd/research/summaries/rspositivethinking.asp>

Research summary - positive thinking

What is positive thinking?

Positive thinking is an umbrella term for a range of ideas and techniques associated with the psychology of achievement. It is the main idea that lies behind the self-help movement that originated in the United States and has since become very influential worldwide.

Positive thinking aims to help people be more aware of the power of their thoughts and moods and how to manage them in order to lead happier and more successful lives. The central idea is that it is not what happens to individuals, which leads them to be happy, healthy or successful, but how they *interpret* what happens to them and the extent to which they believe that it is possible to influence such events.

Advocates of positive thinking believe that it is possible for individuals to make conscious decisions about how they are going to view the events in their lives, to learn to be optimistic rather than pessimistic and exercise more control.

Whilst positive thinking has traditionally been viewed as a strategy for helping people to deal with problems, an increasing number of schools are implementing positive thinking programmes in order to improve the quality of learning and achievement in young people. The underpinning principle is that positive thinking (sometimes referred to as 'learned optimism') leads to better learning.



The growth of positive thinking

'It is not things in themselves that trouble us but our opinion of things.' Epictetus (341-270 BC)

'There is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so.' Shakespeare, Hamlet (Act 2, Scene ii, 1601)

The idea of positive thinking has been around for a long time. In the modern world, its roots lie mainly in cognitive psychology and cognitive therapy, but it also draws on other branches of psychology, physiology and physical medicine.

Cognitive approaches developed in the United States during the 1970s as a means of providing practical solutions for depression and other psychological problems which, it was claimed, behaviourist and other value-based psychological systems could not.

Over time, however, positive thinking has developed far beyond the treatment of psychological problems. It forms the basis of a set of personal development techniques known as 'Neuro Linguistic Programming', which claims to provide step-by-step procedures to help people achieve excellence. It has variously been described as 'the new science of personal achievement', 'the psychology of achievement' and 'the psychology of excellence'.

In recent years positive thinking has become increasingly popular in the corporate sector and in the world of sport. Self-help books feature prominently on bestseller lists and there is a growing number of motivational 'gurus' such as Anthony Robbins in the United States and Jack Black in the UK.

Optimism

One of the most prominent advocates of positive thinking is Professor Martin Seligman - an American psychologist famous for his work on learned optimism. Seligman's work emphasizes happiness rather than success and he believes that that **optimism** is one of the most important factors. What matters, he argues, is the way that people interpret what happens to them and how they think about a positive or negative event in their lives.

All people have an internal dialogue - we talk to ourselves constantly, analysing situations, making judgements about events and either questioning or reinforcing our perceptions of the world around us.

According to Seligman, when faced with an event where something negative happens, people can choose to place either a temporary or a permanent frame around it. People have an internal dialogue where they might say to themselves, 'This is my fault. It's going to get worse and there is nothing I can do about it. It will last forever'. Others, however, might say to themselves, 'What happened was out of my control. The situation is only temporary and, I can change things for the better.' The reverse holds for when people experience good events, the pessimistic thinker views the effects as temporary, whereas the optimistic thinker will embrace the positive situation and place a permanent frame around it. Seligman's believes that optimistic learners achieve more during their school years and throughout their lives.

Explanatory style

Seligman calls the way we interpret these events our explanatory style, and he identifies three main elements: permanence, pervasiveness, and personalisation.

Permanence: Is the situation likely to continue? Might it happen again? Is it permanent or temporary? If it is a bad thing, the optimist tends to think it is a one-off. If it is a good thing, they tend to think it is permanent. The opposite holds true for the pessimist: good things are the one-off events and bad things are more likely to recur.

Pervasiveness: Is the situation 'specific' or is it 'universal'? This considers whether we believe an event applies to everything in our lives, or just a single occurrence. With a good event, the optimist is more likely to extend it to his or her whole life. When something bad happens, an optimist will regard it as specific to that situation. A pessimist, however, will view good events as a fluke. If something bad happens, they think it sums up their whole life.

Personalisation: Did I cause this to happen? This aspect considers whether we believe that we are responsible for an event, or if it was something outwith our control. When something good happens, an optimist congratulates himself for doing a good job. A pessimist, however, is more likely to attribute the success to luck, other people's hard work, or something else outside of his control. When something bad happens, the optimist looks to external factors to explain the event - it might be put down to simple bad luck. A pessimist, however, will usually be willing to take responsibility for the bad event.



The 'so what' of optimism

Learned optimism

Seligman's extensive research across a number of sectors and industries shows that people who have an optimistic mindset achieve more positive outcomes than those with a negative mindset.

Applying this to a school setting, learners who are optimistic about events and situations will frequently achieve more than those who are pessimistic. For optimistic learners, failure to achieve a learning outcome or to pass a test will be a one-off event, specific to that test, perhaps bad luck or an off day. For pessimistic learners, such failure will be viewed as ongoing, typical of their lives, likely to occur again and most certainly their own fault.

Optimistic learners are, therefore, much more able to overcome barriers to learning and persevere until learning outcomes are achieved. Pessimistic learners, by contrast, internalise failure and usually stop trying.

One of the underpinning principles of Seligman's work is that people can learn to be optimistic and to change the nature of their internal dialogue so that they react positively to events, regardless of whether they are good or bad. Schools that have implemented learned optimism programmes deploy a range of strategies to enable young people to think more positively. They help learners to recognise and understand their typical responses to different situations and develop new, more effective ways to interpret events and overcome perceived barriers to their learning.

Such schools recognise that the language that we use to communicate with others and with ourselves can have a major influence on how we think and feel. Proponents of learned optimism believe that by changing our habitual vocabulary, we can change the way we think and feel and consequently achieve more positive outcomes. The use of positive language is an integral part of learned optimism programmes.

Schools also recognise that for young people to achieve success, they must be able to develop persistence - the ability not to give up in the face of failure. Seligman believes that optimistic self-talk (internal dialogue) is the key to developing persistence.

Some key messages

All of our feelings, beliefs and knowledge are based on our internal thoughts, both conscious and subconscious, and we are in control of these processes. We can choose to be positive or negative, enthusiastic or dull, active or passive. These choices influence our feelings and behaviour, and they can also impact on our physical health.

Such choices are habits, developed over a lifetime and shaped by the feedback of parents, friends, teachers, and colleagues and also by our own self talk. They are maintained by the inner conversations we have with ourselves, both consciously and subconsciously.

The first step in changing developing positive attitudes is to change our inner conversations. If we can learn to think more optimistically about events and situations, we are more likely to be happy and achieve success.

Positive thinkers visualise what they want to happen, not what they wish to avoid. They are able to develop mindsets that empower, rather than limit their potential. Positive thinking stresses action - we learn and develop by doing what needs to be done, by moving from our current situation to where we want to be in the future.

Top sports coaches believe that positive mental attitudes are every bit as important as physical fitness. An increasing number of health practitioners believe that physical ailments can be better addressed through positive thinking techniques rather than conventional medicine. Positive psychology also forms an important part of training programmes in commerce and industry.

Not everyone, however, is convinced by the claims associated with positive psychology. Some observers believe that positive thinking is too strongly identified with the individualistic cultures of the USA and the UK. Much of the best selling literature focuses on getting and on developing techniques for manipulating others. It is sometimes argued that self-help strategies are about making money and achieving success at the expense of other people, ultimately to the detriment of our inner, or what Seligman terms *authentic*, happiness.

Seligman believes that there are three main types of happiness encapsulated within different types of life.

- The pleasant life - deriving happiness from sensual pleasures.
- The good life - happiness gained from enjoying something we are good at.
- The meaningful life - achieving authentic happiness by pursuing a cause that contributes to the greater good and by committing one's strengths to it.

Achieving a good and meaningful life is the secret of lasting happiness according to Seligman.

Some observers, however, claim that being overly positive can be detrimental within a learning environment. Research in the USA shows that where schools seek to boost self-esteem by providing, for example, high levels of praise and affirmation regardless of what learners achieve, this can inhibit young people from developing important skills required for life as well as learning. Pupils who never experience failure or criticism at school do not develop the coping strategies required when this happens later in life, and they are unlikely to display perseverance when faced with challenges and barriers to their learning. There is a danger in building high esteem amongst learners if it is not predicated upon real achievement and a proficiency in skills.

Many educationalists, therefore, now refer to the importance of building self-efficacy in learners - high esteem coupled with a proficiency in skills. This helps to create a sense of general confidence and well-being, which in turn create an optimum mind state for learning in young people. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes this mind state as the 'art of flow', which is critical to effective, deep level learning.



The implications for schools and classrooms

Although positive psychology is prominent in many aspects of life and work, it has yet to find widespread application in our schools. This is, however, changing and a growing number of teachers are implementing strategies associated with positive thinking and learned optimism. Such techniques form the basis of what has come to be known as ‘accelerated learning’.

The emerging Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland emphasises confidence and success in learners, and it identifies personal and social development as one of the foundations of the curriculum at all stages. This is likely to result in greater teaching of skills associated with, for example, metacognition, emotional intelligence, self-motivation, learned optimism and perseverance.

In the meantime, all teachers can use positive thinking techniques more consciously and systematically by:

- talking with learners about their beliefs and the way that they think about and respond to success and failure
- helping pupils to develop positive mindsets and to be optimistic about future learning outcomes
- encouraging pupils to identify barriers to their learning and to develop persistence
- using positive language, particularly the use of praise, when providing pupils with feedback on their learning
- making more use of positive language in teaching situations and helping learners to develop a positive vocabulary as part of their self-talk
- modelling positive behaviour within the classroom
- helping young people to develop a sense of purpose: seeing the big picture and also the steps required to achieve learning goals
- teaching young people how to set and achieve goals and how to monitor their progress
- encouraging young people to develop a can-do attitude and to take greater responsibility for their decisions and actions.

Further reading

Books to help you reflect

'Authentic Happiness' (Martin Seligman, Nicolas Brealey, 2003)

'Flow: The Psychology of Human Happiness' (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Random, 1992)

Books with practical ideas

'Being Happy' (Andrew Matthews, Media Masters, 1988)

'Stop Thinking and Start Living' (Richard Carlson, Thorsons, 1993)

'Learned Optimisim' (Martin E P Seligman, PhD, Freepress, 1998)

Useful websites

www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu

www.positivepsychology.net

www.self-help.org.uk