



# Practicing Optimism

Dr. Martin Seligman, researcher and author of *Learned Optimism*, says that the path to optimism involves examining your responses to negative experiences in terms of scope, duration, and cause of the event. Example: You didn't get the promotion you were expecting. A pessimist might say "I'll never go anywhere in this company." (duration); "Nothing ever goes my way." (scope); "My manager has it out for me." (blaming). An optimistic explanation might be, "I didn't get the promotion this time, but the company is growing so there will be other opportunities." (duration); "Things are going well in other areas." (scope); "I see they promoted the person with the most computer experience. I think I will take that workshop on Power Point." (non-blaming). Think about how you might respond to these negative events:

- You are given a ticket for speeding ten miles over the limit.
- Your date never called as promised.
- You received a lower grade than expected in class.

People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don't believe in circumstances. The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and, if they can't find them, make them.

George Bernard Shaw

## Optimism or Pollyanna?

Pessimists frequently think of themselves as realists and believe optimists are simple minded, in denial, and look at the world through rose-colored glasses. There certainly are circumstances and jobs where unexamined optimism is inappropriate or even dangerous. You don't want an overly optimistic airline pilot or compliance officer. But careers dealing primarily with people are greatly enhanced by an optimistic attitude. Imagine a pessimistic sales person, manager, teacher, or nurse. Pessimism could keep you from making that next call, motivating your staff, seeing promise in your students, or giving hope to your patients.

An optimist may see a light where there is none, but why must the pessimist always run to blow it out? Michel De Saint-Pierre

## Why does optimism matter?

You may be asking, "What's in it for me?" Numerous studies have found that pessimists are more vulnerable to depression, experience more stress, and have weaker immune systems. Optimists have a greater ability to cope with change, a better sense of well-being and happiness, enjoy better health, and are more resilient and able to bounce back after disappointment. Their optimistic attitude makes a positive outcome more likely and they have much more fun.

No pessimist has ever discovered the secrets of the stars or sailed uncharted land or opened a new heaven to the human spirit.

Helen Keller