Tapping Into Your Inner Optimist

Clearly, what we attend to can influence our experiences, both good or bad. Numerous studies have shown that the degree to which individuals are successful at influencing their attentional processes, affects their subsequent affective experience and behavioural trajectories. For instance, people diagnosed with depression and anxiety are characterised by a persistent bias to attend towards negative events relative to positive or neutral events (Bar-Haim et al. 2007). Moreover, an excessive focus on negative information has been identified in eating disorders (Dobson & Dozois, 2004), post-traumatic stress disorder (Buckley, Blanchard, & Neill, 2000) as well as in situations related to physical threats (Erblich et al., 2003) and physical health (Williams, Wasserman, & Lotto, 2003). In all these cases, research showed that a health condition of concern is associated with biased attention. In general, it appears that there are individual differences in attending to and focusing on the positive and negative aspects of events, which influences the experience of these events.

Optimists are more likely than pessimists to find meaning or growth in stressful experiences (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; Park, 1998; Scheier et al., 1986). Attentional processes may possibly play a role in these observed differences between optimists and pessimists. Research has shown that when optimistic people are confronted with positive and negative stimuli, that they pay significantly more attention to the positive stimuli. Pessimists, on the other hand, pay significantly more attention to the negative stimuli (Segerstrom, 2001; Isaacowitz, 2005). This implies that when confronted with the same life event, a more pessimistic individual might be preoccupied more with the negative or threatening aspects of the event and overlook the positive or encouraging aspects. On the other hand, a more optimistic individual would be more likely to attend to and process both positive and negative aspects of the event. Possibly, the ability to attend to the positive aspects of a stressful situation may be a pre-requisite for find meaning or growth in it. After all, attending to positive aspects increases the probability that they will be incorporated into an understanding of the situation. This incorporation of positive aspects lies at the heart of positive interpretation of events. In this exercise, clients explore the difference between focusing on positive and negative information.

This tool was developed to help people experience the difference between focussing on positive versus focussing on negative information. It incorporates chair work, which is a technique utilised in schema therapy (Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003) where the client moves between two chairs as he or she dialogues between different ‘modes’ of him or herself. In this exercise, these modes will be ‘pessimist’ and ‘optimist’.
Goal

The goal of this tool is to help clients to explore the difference between focusing on positive versus focusing on negative information. This tool can help clients to become aware of their own ability to look at situations from a certain perspective.

Advice

- Advise your client about the limitations of being too optimistic by ignoring negative information, such as using optimism when trying to play for a risky or uncertain future, because pessimism actually helps us to maintain caution, prudence, and analytic thinking (which are key components to effective decision-making). The goal is not to become only optimistic and never pessimistic; it is about choosing the type of explanatory style that will be most effective for a given situation.

- Some clients may falsely believe that the goal of this exercise is for them to "always think positively". It is important for them to realise that positive thinking per se is not always beneficial. Especially when positive thinking is used to avoid or control negative experiences; this is a form of experiential avoidance (Hayes et al., 1999), a phenomenon that has been linked with a great diversity of negative outcomes (see Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996, for a review). The goal of this exercise is for them to notice the difference between a positive and negative outlook and become aware of their own power to look at situations from a certain perspective.

Author

This tool was created by Hugo Alberts (PhD) (https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Hugo_Alberts) and Lucinda Poole (PsyD) (https://www.linkedin.com/in/lucinda-poole-24a122121/)
Suggested Readings


Tapping Into Your Inner Optimist

Instructions

In this exercise, you will experience the difference between focusing on positive information versus focusing on negative information. The two chairs in front of you each represent a different mindset: the first chair represents your inner optimist, and the second chair represents your inner pessimist. I am going to ask you a series of questions, and your job is to embody these different mindsets as you answer. We’ll start with your pessimistic self, and then have a go at embodying your optimistic self. As you do this exercise, tune in to what it feels like during and after embodying each mindset.

Step 1: Tap into your inner pessimist

Take a seat in the pessimistic mindset chair. Now, answer the following questions with regards to the past week, speaking from your inner pessimist. Remember that your inner pessimist has a generally bleak, negative outlook on life. Over the past week:

- What negative or unpleasant emotions showed up?
- What were some things that annoyed you?
- What difficulties did you face at work?
- What was challenging at home?
- What is one thing that made you disappointed in yourself?

Step 2: Tap into your inner optimist

Now, move into the optimistic mindset chair. I am going to ask you some more questions, however this time you will respond from your inner optimist. Compared with a pessimistic mindset, an optimistic mindset views events in life as less personal, permanent and pervasive. In other words, our inner optimist recognises that events and situations in life involve other people and other circumstances, are temporary, and are unique and specific experiences. Over the past week:

- What pleasant emotions showed up?
- What were some things that made you feel happy, excited, or joyful?
- What good things happened at work?
- What was worked well at home?
- What is one thing that made you proud of yourself?

Step 3: Evaluate your experience

Now, come back and take a seat in your normal chair. Consider the following:

- How did it feel to embody your pessimistic mindset? What did you notice?
- How did it feel to embody your optimistic mindset?
- What did you learn from this exercise?
- How could you use your insights from this exercise in your daily life?