

# We Can't Change Our Stripes... *or Can We?*

## How to Learn to Be More Optimistic

BY JUDY KAY MAUSOLF



You may have heard the zebra cannot change its stripes; which refers to the notion that one can't change their inherent nature. For example, having an Eeyore-ish or pessimistic attitude of glass half empty.

It is true that we can't change other people...but we can always change ourselves. We are all capable of magnificent and earth-shattering changes. We can change when we want to change. We change when we are inspired to change, when we are so desperate that we have to change or when the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of change.

Change may be difficult but it is always attainable when we commit to the change 100%. Our success is dependent on our beliefs, focus and perseverance.

One of the most significant findings in psychology in the last 20 years is that we can choose the way we think. We can choose to think negatively or we can choose to think positively. There are many benefits to learning to become more optimistic. People who are more optimistic have better coping skills, consistently achieve more and are healthier and happier. Here are some signs that you may want to boost your optimism level. Do you:

- Get discouraged easily
- Get depressed frequently
- Think you fail more than you should

Whether we are an optimist or a pessimist starts with what I refer to as the Emotional Reaction Cycle. Something happens, we assign meaning, which creates our feelings and determines our actions. The cycle continues to happen and we get into a habitual way of explaining events. It becomes our explanatory style. Our explanatory style is the fundamental difference between an optimist and a pessimist. Before we can change pessimism into optimism, we must first understand the key elements. There are three key elements to our explanatory style: permanence, pervasiveness and personalization.

### **The first element is Permanence.**

Permanence is based on time. An Optimist believes:

- Bad events are temporary
- Good events are permanent – driven by their traits and abilities
- Use words like sometimes and lately

Whereas a Pessimist believes:

- Bad events are permanent
- Good events are temporary – driven by chance and out of their control
- Use words like always and never

Failure makes everyone at least momentarily helpless. It takes the wind out of our sails. I think of it as losing my orange cape. It hurts but the hurt goes away – for some of us optimists, almost instantly. For pessimists, the hurt lasts and spins into anger or frenzy. Pessimists remain helpless for days or even months, even after small setbacks. A major defeat can destroy them.

Optimists believe good events have permanent causes and try harder after they succeed. Whereas pessimists see temporary reasons for good events and may even give up when they succeed,

believing that they are out of their control and it was a fluke.

Pessimists are the ones always waiting for the other shoe to drop!

### **The second element is Pervasiveness.**

Pervasiveness is about space. An Optimist:

- Compartmentalizes their troubles
- Bad events happen in a specific area

Whereas a Pessimist:

- Catastrophizes their troubles
- Bad events affect everything - universal

### **The third element is Personalization.**

Personalization is about ownership.

An Optimist:

- Doesn't take bad events in life personally – bad things just sometimes happen
- Believe they are the cause of good things

Whereas a Pessimist:

- Bad events in life happen to them
- Good things happen by accident

Once we understand the main differences, we can learn to shift our explanatory style from pessimistic to a more optimistic one with cognitive therapy. So let's go back to the emotional reaction cycle. An event happens that seems like an adversity. If you catch yourself thinking, "This is bad. Why does this always happen to me?" or "This is going to ruin everything." Stop yourself immediately from spinning and ruminating further. Identify and challenge the automatic negative thoughts by questioning and disputing the limiting beliefs. Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Is this really a negative or is this an opportunity to bring on something even better? How can I spin this into a positive and make something good out of it?
2. Is this really happening to me and is it just me or do difficult things sometimes happen to all of us in life?
3. Does this really affect everything in my life or just a specific area? What areas are good in my life...health, family, career...etc?
4. Does this really happen all the time? What are some good things that have happened lately?
5. Verify the accuracy of your beliefs by asking yourself; "Is this the only possible answer?" Identify 3 potential positive answers.
6. Take action steps to support a potential positive outcome.

# “ Words have power! ”

When we consistently question and dispute our negative limiting beliefs we can reprogram our explanatory style to become more positive and optimistic. The more optimistic we become the more we empower ourselves to become a creator of life! The more we create the more optimistic we become. A creator seizes every day as an opportunity. They understand that life is uncertain, life is unexpected, life changes in a moment and no one owes them anything! They focus on what feels happy and good in life. They identify what they don't like and take specific action steps to change them instead of dwelling on them they by complaining,

criticizing, blaming, gossiping or comparing themselves to others. They think in terms of could instead of should. For example, I could get a new job versus I should get a new job! Words have power. The word "could" inspires and empowers us to unlimited possibilities. The word "should" feels heavy and controlling and limits us.

The awesome news is we can indeed reprogram our explanatory style and become more optimistic in every moment of every day. The choice is always up to us! Choose to be a creator!



## JUDY KAY MAUSOLF, OWNER & PRESIDENT OF PRACTICE SOLUTIONS, INC.

Judy Kay is a dental practice management coach, speaker and author. She coaches dentists and managers who want to be better leaders, get their teams to work together better and ultimately grow their practice.

She is President of National Speakers Association (NSA) Minnesota Chapter (2012-13), and a member of the NSA Academy of Dental Management Consultants, Speaking Consulting Network and an Advanced Transformational Trainer. She is author of Rise & Shine; An Evolutionary Journey to Get Out of Your Way and On Your Way to Success, and a contributing author for The Progressive Dentist, Dental Economics, AGD Impact, First Impression, Pink Tooth and the Observer. [PracticeSolutionsInc.net](http://PracticeSolutionsInc.net) [judykay@practicesolutionsinc.net](mailto:judykay@practicesolutionsinc.net)

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