Learned Optimism

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This is my summary and abstraction of the book “Learned Optimism” by Martin Seligman. The book is about understanding and dealing with personal tendencies towards optimism or hopelessness. The book has some very good concepts, but is rather long-winded on the diagnostic and issues associated with all of this and doesn’t spend enough time on tools and tactics. One interesting aspect of the book is that it includes a diagnostic tool for adults and also for children.

Dr. Seligman is a clinical/research psychologist (i.e. a “rat pusher”). He observed and studied how animals and people deal with adversity. He wanted to do some research in this area and stepped up through the levels of animals - starting with rats, then insurance salesmen and finally dogs. The experiment on dogs was very instructive:

There were 3 groups - positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement and a control group. The negative group were put in a cage with no exit and given a series of electric shocks. At first they searched for a way get out, but finally gave up. The positive group were put in a cage, identical with the first except there was an exit (no top). Almost all the dogs jumped out as soon as the shock occurred. Over a very short period, they would all jump out as soon as the shock happened. The control group received no conditioning. The second part of the experiment consisted of all three groups being put into the ‘positive’ cages (with an exit). The positive group, when tested, all jumped out. The control group almost all jumped out immediately. The negative group, when tested, just laid down and took the shock! Even though they had a way out. They had learned to be hopeless. Dr. Seligman thought that it should be possible to learn optimism in the same way that hopelessness could be learned.

In his research with people, he came up with a model of how people react to situations - both good and bad. The model has three aspects:

Permanence	Is the situation permanent or temporary?
Pervasiveness	Is the situation a local thing or very broad in scope?
Personalization	Is the situation because of something I did or because of someone/something else?

So, an ‘ultimate optimist’ will react to situations as follows:

	Good event	**Bad event**
Permanence	long lasting	short term
Pervasiveness	impacts everything	no side effects
Personalized	because of me	because of you

On the flip side is the ‘ultimate pessimist’:

	Good event	**Bad event**
Permanence	short term	long lasting
Pervasiveness	no side effects	impacts everything
Personalized	because of you	because of me

So, a optimist has a car wreck: It is no big deal, just a momentary distraction. Nothing will come of it. And it was the other bone-headed driver’s problem (or the road was slick). Compare this with the pessimist: The car is ruined, it is going to take weeks to fix it. My insurance rates will go up and I’ll have trouble for years getting decent insurance. It was my fault because I wasn’t paying attention.

Most people are a blend and have different levels for these characteristics. There are natural tendencies that people have - but they can be overcome. One thing that I thought was very good about the book was its view that different jobs require different characteristics. So, for example, salesmen generally have to be optimists because of the rejection they go through. Safety engineering people should be mildly pessimistic (personally, I do want a pessimist to be designing that nuclear power plant - thank you very much.) At the back of the book, there is a chapter on the concepts as applied to an organization. It talks about characteristic jobs and what to look for.

Even though there is value in some pessimistic characteristics and issues with overly developed optimism, pessimism presents real problems for people. Seligman makes the case that:

- pessimism promotes depression
- pessimism produces inertia, rather than activity
- pessimism is self-fulfilling (a negative spiral)
- pessimism is associated with poor physical health
- pessimism makes a situation worse than it really is

Most times, pessimists don't even feel better when they can say "I told you so". (There is also an interesting chapter in the back where the author looks at political elections back several decades and can predict the outcome based on the relative optimism of the candidates.) So, pessimism is bad. So what do you or can you do about it?

The model that Seligman has for being more optimistic is straight-forward and sort of cutsie, but helpful. The first part of this is a metric - very much along the lines of of 'you can't control what you don't measure'. He calls this metric his ABCs - adversity, beliefs, and consequences.

Adversity	when *Adversity* happens, we react by forming
Beliefs	our thoughts into *Beliefs* which cause us
Consequences	to act certain ways with *Consequences*

The author suggests that you track your ABCs over a few days. Look for the link between the beliefs and the consequences. If you can change you beliefs, if even only slightly, you can change and improve your reaction to adversity. The author talks about dealing with the beliefs (habitual, pessimistic) in a few ways - distraction, disputation and distancing:

Distraction	• Think about something else. • Do something else (another task). • Try physical activity. • Change your environment or locale. • Schedule time to think about it later.
Disputation	• Argue with yourself about the belief - Why is it so bad? • What is the real evidence? • Are there alternative explanations. • What is the worse that can happen? • How useful is the belief, even if true?
Distancing	• Recognize that this is only a belief • It is not necessarily a fact.

So, once you have worked at the belief, you need to move beyond the adversity (the author calls this 'energizing'). (This makes his approach ABCDE - I said it was a bit cutsie.)