

 Mindset Exercise 20 min Client No

Tapping Into Your Inner Optimist

What we attend to can influence our experiences, both good and bad. Numerous studies have shown that the degree to which individuals are successful at influencing their attentional processes affects their subsequent affective experience and behavioral trajectories. For instance, people diagnosed with depression and anxiety persistently attend to 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 has shown that a health condition 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 influence 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 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, 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 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, an 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 prerequisite for finding meaning in it or grow from 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 a 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 focusing on positive versus focusing on negative information. It incorporates chair work, which is a technique utilized 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.'



Author

This tool was created by Hugo Alberts (Ph.D.) and Lucinda Poole (PsyD).



Goal

The goal of this tool is to help clients explore the difference between focusing on positive versus focusing on negative information. This tool can help clients become aware of their 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 plan for a risky or uncertain future, because pessimism 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.” They need to realize that positive thinking per se is not always beneficial. Especially when positive thinking is used to avoid or control negative experiences, it becomes a form of experiential avoidance (Hayes et al., 1999), a phenomenon that has been linked to 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 power to look at situations from a certain perspective.



References

- Bar-Haim, Y., Lamy, D., Pergamin, L., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., & Van Ijzendoorn, M. H. (2007). Threat-related attentional bias in anxious and nonanxious individuals: A meta-analytic study. *Psychological Bulletin*, 133(1), 1.
- Buckley, T. C., Blanchard, E. B., & Neill, W. T. (2000). Information processing and PTSD: A review of the empirical literature. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 20(8), 1041-1065.
- Davis, C. G., Nolen-Hoeksema, S., & Larson, J. (1998). Making sense of loss and benefiting from the experience: two construals of meaning. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75(2), 561.
- Dobson, K. S., & Dozois, D. J. (2004). Attentional biases in eating disorders: A meta-analytic review of Stroop performance. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 23(8), 1001-1022.
- Erbllich, J., Montgomery, G. H., Valdimarsdottir, H. B., Cloutre, M., & Bovbjerg, D. H. (2003). Biased cognitive processing of cancer-related information among women with family histories of breast cancer: Evidence from a cancer Stroop task. *Health psychology*, 22(3), 235.
- Isaacowitz, D. M. (2005). The gaze of the optimist. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31(3), 407-415.
- Park, C. L. (1998). Stress-related growth and thriving through coping: The roles of personality and cognitive processes. *Journal of social issues*, 54(2), 267-277.
- Scheier, M. F., Weintraub, J. K., & Carver, C. S. (1986). Coping with stress: Divergent strategies of optimists and pessimists. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51(6), 1257.
- Segerstrom, S. C. (2001). Optimism and attentional bias for negative and positive stimuli. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 27(10), 1334-1343.
- Williams, P. G., Wasserman, M. S., & Lotto, A. J. (2003). Individual differences in self-assessed health: An information-processing investigation of health and illness cognition. *Health Psychology*, 22(1), 3.



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 move on to embody your optimistic self. As you do this exercise, tune into 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, your inner optimist recognizes that events and situations in life involve other people and other circumstances; they 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 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?