Why Positive Psychology Helps Victims of Abuse

"Psychology is much larger than curing mental illness or curing diseases. I think it’s about bringing out the best in people; it’s about positive institutions; it’s about strength of character."

Q: In your work thus far, is there one piece of research that you would like to see on every bumper sticker, and chalkboard, and refrigerator door in the country?

Dr. Seligman: I think it’s basically that if you are a pessimist in the sense that when bad things happen you think they are going to last forever and undermine everything you do, then you are about eight times as likely to get depressed, you are less likely to succeed at work, your personal relationships are more likely to break up, and you are likely to have a shorter and more illness-filled life. That’s the main discovery that I associate with my lifetime.

Q: People often ask how to start shifting from pessimism to optimism?

Dr. Seligman: I think the way most people start is to find out the costs of being a pessimist. As a pessimist, it’s always wet weather in the soul, they don’t do as well at work, and they get colds that will last all winter. They find themselves failing in crucial situations and their relationships go sour very easily. So when people have those kinds of hurts, if they can find that there is something useful in positive psychology, that’s where people start.

Positive psychology is empirically based. This is not positive affirmations and visualization. It is a methodology that makes lasting changes and enables people to respond to difficult situations in a manner in which they can feel control. It is based on the original work of Martin Seligman on learned helplessness with dogs. It was found they could be trained to "unlearn" their helplessness and when they did, their depression was gone.

Depression is not anger turned inward as Freudians would have you believe. It is loss of feeling in control. Nothing brings someone to this position faster than being the victim of a narcissist or sociopath.

Positive psychology never disputes reality, it makes reality easier to handle. The feeling of having some control is the difference between continuing to feel traumatized or not. No matter how controlling or abusive your partner, and no matter how long the 'learned helplessness' it has been proven that beginning to exert control jumpstarts the process of "relearning" and loss of control feelings diminish.

Optimism is critical in abuse. It does NOT mean you do not see how bad things are. It means that optimists have better outcomes in negative situations and that is your goal. There are solid reasons why this is so and methods to obtain this outlook. This is not to be confused with Vaknin’s phrase "malignant optimism". By that he means an outlook based on unrealistic hopes and dreams of a better life, changing the abuser, and you the victim, learning to be a better person. These are indeed useless acts. You will not change the
abuser.

Pessimists see the causes of failure as permanent (it's going to last forever), pervasive (it's going to ruin everything) and personal (it's all my fault). Optimists dispute pessimistic thoughts: if this becomes a habit, this skill stays with you and the changes take place in physiological ways such as brain patterns letting you calm down enough to think more rationally and logically. It also allows you to become resilient. The next "bad thing" will depress you for a shorter period of time. You will think of options, you will bounceback quicker. You will take risks, and by doing so, begin to take control.

The following is from a paper examining helplessness and its variations and how attributing causes to situations defines outcomes. (Attribution theory) The entire paper can be found at


Sometimes human helplessness following uncontrollability was chronic; other times, it was transient. Sometimes human helplessness was pervasive; other times, it was circumscribed. And sometimes human helplessness was marked by a striking loss of self-esteem; other times, it was not. The original helplessness theory was silent regarding these variations. Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978) revised the learned helplessness theory as it applied to people, and especially to depression, by proposing that when individuals encounter an uncontrollable aversive event, they ask themselves why.

The answer people give to this question—the causal attribution they entertain—sets the parameters for the helplessness that ensues. Three dimensions of causal attribution were claimed to be important. If the attributed cause were stable ("it's going to last forever") rather than unstable, then helplessness would be long-lasting. If it were global ("it's going to undermine everything") Maier, Peterson, & Schwartz 17 rather than specific, then helplessness would be general.

And if the causal attribution were internal ("it's me") rather than external, then helplessness would be accompanied by a loss of self-esteem. The pattern of causal attributions for a particular instance of uncontrollability would affect a person's expectations for the future. And these expectations would in turn affect the person's behavior.

Reality or social consensus may sometimes dictate the causal explanation that a person embraces; but in more ambiguous circumstances, the individual relies on habitual tendencies to explain bad events in a given way, a personality characteristic described by Seligman as explanatory (or attributional) style (Peterson & Seligman, 1984). Those people who tend to offer stable and global explanations for bad events are not only at risk for helplessness, but also for the failures of adaptation in which helplessness figures in the wake of uncontrollability. Those people who tend to offer internal explanations for bad events are at risk for self esteem loss in the wake of uncontrollability.
This revised account of learned helplessness—the attributional reformulation—is an explanation of human problems that presupposes that people are rational, acting "logically" in accordance with their interpretation of the causes of events. The rationality inherent in the processes proposed by the attributional reformulation of helplessness theory may be what allows it to be used in the service of a positive psychology. For this rationality can explain resilience as readily as helplessness, hope as well as despair, and good cheer as well as depression. It tells us how to intervene to undo passivity as well as how to prevent passivity in the first place. In all cases, how a person thinks about the things he or she experiences is taken seriously. At the same time, it is important to stress that one of the potent determinants of explanatory style is reality, so that interventions cannot be so simple as just urging people to "think positive" when the world in which they live is relentlessly negative.

The attribution reformulation of helplessness theory is a diathesis-stress theory, proposing that the conjunction of objective bad events (the stress) and a pessimistic explanatory style (the diathesis) is necessary for negative behavioral outcomes to ensue. This position builds from the roots of the helplessness approach in the experimental psychology of animal learning, where bad events—the stress (e.g., uncontrollable electric shocks) are presented to research participants. When guiding research with people, the attributional reformulation has usually focused on the cognitive diathesis, which proves a consistent correlate of expected outcomes.

When one of us (Peterson) originally went to the University of Pennsylvania in 1979 to work with Seligman, Seligman supervised both a thriving animal laboratory and a thriving human laboratory. The attributional reformulation of helplessness theory had just been proposed, an Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ) to measure attributional style had been created, and the initial investigation of explanatory style had just been published (Seligman, Abramson, Semmel, & von Baeyer, 1979).

Over the years, explanatory style research has become increasingly popular, and many ways to measure this individual difference variable are now available. The original Attributional Style Questionnaire (Peterson, Semmel, von Baeyer, Abramson, Metalsky, & Seligman, 1982) was expanded, to boost reliability (Peterson & Villanova, 1988), and then simplified (Dykema, Bergbower, Doctora, & Peterson, 1996), to facilitate use with general population samples. A Children's ASQ with a forced choice format was developed by Nadine Kaslow and Richard Tanenbaum (Seligman, Peterson, Kaslow, Tanenbaum, Alloy, & Abramson, 1984) and then refined (Thompson, Kaslow, Weiss, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998). Forced-choice measures suitable for