**Seligman, Martin E. (2011-08-10).**

**Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life (Vintage).**

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Note: To know where you stand on the optimism/pessimism scale, and for this chapter to mean something to you, you should take the relatively short “Optimism Test” and read the analysis at AuthenticHappiness.com (you have to do an easy registration beforehand). (The “Optimism Test” is located in the blue column about halfway down.)

Also, there are some exercises in this chapter that you should get started on ASAP, so get reading this thing early.

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**The Optimistic Life**

LIFE INFLICTS the same setbacks and tragedies on the optimist as on the pessimist, but the optimist weathers them better. As we have seen, the optimist bounces back from defeat, and, with his life somewhat poorer, he picks up and starts again. The pessimist gives up and falls into depression. Because of his resilience, the optimist achieves more at work, at school, and on the playing field. The optimist has better physical health and may even live longer. Americans want optimists to lead them. Even when things go well for the pessimist, he is haunted by forebodings of catastrophe.

For pessimists, that is the bad news. The good news is that pessimists can learn the skills of optimism and permanently improve the quality of their lives. Even optimists can benefit from learning how to change. Almost all optimists have periods of at least mild pessimism, and the techniques that benefit pessimists can be used by optimists when they are down.

Giving up pessimism and becoming more optimistic may seem undesirable to some of you. Your image of an optimist may be the crashing bore, the self-aggrandizing braggart, the chronic blamer of others, never taking responsibility for his own mistakes. But neither optimism nor pessimism has a corner on bad manners. As you will see from this chapter, becoming an optimist consists not of learning to be more selfish and self-assertive, and to present yourself to others in overbearing ways, but simply of learning a set of skills about how to talk to yourself when you suffer a personal defeat. You will learn to speak to yourself about your setbacks from a more encouraging viewpoint.

There is one other reason why learning the skills of optimism may seem undesirable to you. In chapter six we looked at a balance sheet that weighed optimism against pessimism. While optimism had the virtues recapped in the opening of this chapter, pessimism had one virtue: supporting a keener sense of reality. Does learning the skills of optimism mean sacrificing realism?

This is a deep question which puts the goal of these “changing” chapters into sharper focus. They don’t purvey an absolute, unconditional optimism for you to apply blindly in all situations; they offer a flexible optimism. They aim to increase your control over the way you think about adversity. If you have a negative explanatory style, you no longer need to live under the tyranny of pessimism. When bad events strike, you don’t have to look at them in their most permanent, pervasive, and personal light, with the crippling results that pessimistic explanatory style entails. These chapters will give you a choice about how to look at your misfortunes—and an alternative that doesn’t require you to become a slave to blind optimism.

**Guidelines for Using Optimism**

YOUR SCORE on the test in chapter three is the main way to tell whether or not you need to acquire these skills. If your G–B score (your total score) was less than 8, you will benefit from these chapters. The lower it was, the more benefit you will derive. Even if your score was 8 or above, you should ask yourself the following questions; if the answer to any of them is yes, you too can make good use of these chapters.

• “Do I get discouraged easily?”

• “Do I get depressed more than I want to?”

• “Do I fail more than I think I should?”

In what situations should you deploy the explanatory style–changing skills these chapters provide? First, ask yourself what you are trying to accomplish.

• If you are in an achievement situation (getting a promotion, selling a product, writing a difficult report, winning a game), use optimism.

• If you are concerned about how you will feel (fighting off depression, keeping up your morale), use optimism.

• If the situation is apt to be protracted and your physical health is an issue, use optimism.

• If you want to lead, if you want to inspire others, if you want people to vote for you, use optimism. On the other hand, there are times not to use these techniques.

• If your goal is to plan for a risky and uncertain future, do not use optimism.

• If your goal is to counsel others whose future is dim, do not use optimism initially. • If you want to appear sympathetic to the troubles of others, do not begin with optimism, although using it later, once confidence and empathy are established, may help.

The fundamental guideline for not deploying optimism is to ask what the cost of failure is in the particular situation. If the cost of failure is high, optimism is the wrong strategy. The pilot in the cockpit deciding whether to de-ice the plane one more time, the partygoer deciding whether to drive home after drinking, the frustrated spouse deciding whether to start an affair that, should it come to light, would break up the marriage should not use optimism. Here the costs of failure are, respectively, death, an auto accident, and a divorce. Using techniques that minimize those costs is inappropriate. On the other hand, if the cost of failure is low, use optimism. The sales agent deciding whether to make one more call loses only his time if he fails. The shy person deciding whether to attempt to open a conversation risks only rejection. The teenager contemplating learning a new sport risks only frustration. The disgruntled executive, passed over for promotion, risks only some refusals if he quietly puts out feelers for a new position. All should use optimism.

This chapter teaches you the basic principles of changing from pessimism to optimism in your daily life. Unlike the techniques of almost all other self-help formulas—which consist of a gallon of clinical lore but only a teaspoonful of research—these have been thoroughly researched, and thousands of adults have used them to change their explanatory style permanently.

I have organized the three “changing” chapters so that each stands on its own. This one is for use in all the realms of adult life, except the office. The second is for your children. The third is for your work. Each uses essentially the same techniques of learned optimism in a different setting, and so the chapters may seem to repeat each other somewhat. If you are interested in only one of these topics, it is not absolutely necessary to read the other two chapters.

**The ABCs**

KATIE HAS BEEN on a strict diet for two weeks. Tonight after work she goes out for drinks with some friends and eats some of the nachos and chicken wings the others ordered. Immediately afterward she feels she has “ruined” her diet.

She thinks to herself, “Way to go, Katie. You sure blew your diet tonight. I am so unbelievably weak. I can’t even go to a bar with some friends without making a total glutton of myself. They must think I’m such a fool. Well, all my dieting over the last two weeks is blown now, so I might as well really make a pig of myself and eat the cake in the freezer.”

Katie breaks out the Sara Lee and eats a whole chocolate fudge brownie delight. Her diet, followed scrupulously until tonight, begins to unravel.

The connection between Katie’s eating some nachos and chicken wings and then really overindulging is not a necessary one. What links the two is how she explains to herself why she ate the nachos. Her explanation is very pessimistic: “I am so weak.” So is the conclusion she drew: “All my dieting is blown.” In fact, her diet wasn’t blown until she came up with a permanent, pervasive, and personal explanation. Then she gave up.

The consequences of the nacho episode would have been very different if Katie had merely disputed her own automatic first explanation.

“Slow down, Katie,” she might have said to herself. “First of all, I did not make a total glutton of myself at the bar. I drank two Lite Beers and ate a couple of chicken wings and a couple of nachos. I didn’t have dinner, so I think on balance I probably consumed only a few more calories than my diet allows. And letting my diet slip a bit for just one night does not mean I am weak. Think how strong I am in sticking to it so strictly for two weeks. Furthermore, no one thinks I’m a fool. I doubt anyone was keeping tabs on what I was eating, and in fact, a couple of people mentioned I looked slimmer. Most important, even if I did eat some things I shouldn’t have, that doesn’t mean that I should continue to break my diet and set myself back even further. That makes no sense. The best thing to do is cut my losses, let myself off the hook for making a minor mistake, and continue dieting as strictly as I have been for the last two weeks.”

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IT’S A matter of ABC\*: When we encounter adversity, we react by thinking about it. Our thoughts rapidly congeal into beliefs. These beliefs may become so habitual we don’t even realize we have them unless we stop and focus on them. And they don’t just sit there idly; they have consequences. The beliefs are the direct causes of what we feel and what we do next. They can spell the difference between dejection and giving up, on the one hand, and well-being and constructive action on the other.

We have seen throughout this book that certain kinds of beliefs set off the giving-up response. I am now going to teach you how to interrupt this vicious circle. The first step is to see the connection between adversity, belief, and consequence. The second step is to see how the ABCs operate every day in your own life. These techniques are part of a course developed by two of the world’s leading cognitive therapists—Dr. Steven Hollon, professor of psychology at Vanderbilt University and editor of the major journal in the field, and Dr. Arthur Freeman, professor of psychiatry at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey—along with myself, to change explanatory style among normal people.

I want you now to identify some ABCs so you can see how they work. I’ll supply the adversity, along with either the belief or the consequence. You fill in the missing component.

**Identifying ABCs**

1. A. Someone zips into the parking space you had your eye on.

B. You think\_\_\_\_\_

C. You get angry, roll down your window, and shout at the other driver.

2. A. You yell at your children for not doing their homework.

B. You think “I’m a lousy mother.”

C. You feel (or do)\_\_\_\_\_\_

3. A. Your best friend hasn’t returned your phone calls.

B. You think\_\_\_\_\_\_

C. You’re depressed all day.

4. A. Your best friend hasn’t returned your phone calls.

B. You think\_\_\_\_\_\_

C. You don’t feel bad about it, and go about your day.

5. A. You and your spouse have a fight.

B. You think “I never do anything right.”

C. You feel (or do)\_\_\_\_\_\_

6. A. You and your spouse have a fight.

B. You think, “She [He] was in an awful mood.”

C. You feel (or do)\_\_\_\_\_\_

7. A. You and your spouse have a fight.

B. You think, “I can always clear up misunderstandings.”

C. You feel (or do)\_\_\_\_\_\_

Now, let’s take a look at these seven situations and see how the elements interact.

1. In the first example, thoughts of trespass set off your anger. “That driver stole my place.” “That was a rude and selfish thing to do.”

2. When you explained your treatment of your children with “I’m a lousy mother,” sadness and a reluctance to try to get them to do their homework followed. When we explain bad events as the result of permanent, pervasive, and personal traits like being a lousy mother, dejection and giving up follow. The more permanent the trait, the longer dejection will last.

3 and 4. You can see this when your best friend doesn’t return your phone calls. If, as in the third example, you thought something permanent and pervasive—such as “I’m always selfish and inconsiderate. No wonder”—depression would follow. But if, as in the fourth example, your explanation was temporary, specific, and external, you wouldn’t be disturbed. “She’s working overtime this week,” you might say to yourself, or “She’s in a funk.”

5, 6, and 7. How about when you and your spouse have a fight? If, as in example 5, you think “I never do anything right” (permanent, pervasive, personal), you will be depressed and not try to do anything to heal the breach. If, as in example 6, you think “She was in an awful mood” (temporary and external), you will feel some anger, a little dejection, and only temporary immobility. When the mood clears, you’ll probably do something to make up. If, as in example 7, you think “I can always clear up misunderstandings,” you will act to make up and you soon will feel pretty good and full of energy.

**Your ABC Record**

To find out how these ABCs operate in daily existence, keep an ABC diary for the next day or two, just long enough for you to record five ABCs from your own life.

To do this, tune in on the perpetual dialogue that takes place in your mind and that you are usually unaware of. It’s a matter of picking up the connection between a certain adversity—even a very minor one—and a consequent feeling. So, for example, you are talking to a friend on the phone. She seems very eager to get off the phone (a distressing minor adversity for you), and you then find yourself sad (the consequent feeling). This little episode will become an ABC entry for you.

There are three parts to your record.

The first section, “Adversity,” can be almost anything—a leaky faucet, a frown from a friend, a baby that won’t stop crying, a large bill, inattentiveness from your spouse. Be objective about the situation. Record your description of what happened, not your evaluation of it. So if you had an argument with your spouse, you might write down that she was unhappy with something you said or did. Record that. But do not record “She was unfair” under “Adversity.” That’s an inference, and you may want to record that in the second section: “Belief.”

Your beliefs are how you interpret the adversity. Be sure to separate thoughts from feelings. (Feelings will go under “Consequences.”) “I just blew my diet” and “I feel incompetent” are beliefs. Their accuracy can be evaluated. “I feel sad,” however, expresses a feeling. It doesn’t make sense to check the accuracy of “I feel sad”; if you feel sad, you are sad.

“Consequences.” In this section, record your feelings and what you did. Did you feel sad, anxious, joyful, guilty, or whatever? Often you will feel more than one thing. Write down as many feelings and actions as you were aware of. What did you then do? “I had no energy,” “I made a plan to get her to apologize,” “I went back to bed” are all consequent actions.

Before you start, here are some helpful examples of the sort of thing you may experience.

Adversity: My husband was supposed to give the kids their bath and put them to bed, but when I got home from my meeting they were all glued to the TV.

Belief: Why can’t he do what I ask him? Is it such a hard thing to give them their bath and put them to bed? Now I’m going to look like the heavy when I break up their little party.

Consequences: I was really angry with Jack and started yelling without first giving him a chance to explain. I walked into the room and snapped off the set without even a “hello” first. I looked like the heavy.

Adversity: I came home early from work and found my son and his friends in the garage smoking pot.

Belief: What does he think he’s doing? I’m going to strangle him! This just goes to show how irresponsible he is. I can’t trust him at all. Everything out of his mouth is just one lie after another. Well, I’m not going to listen to any of it.

Consequences: I was out-of-my-mind angry at him. I refused even to discuss the situation. I told him he was “an untrustworthy little delinquent,” and I spent the rest of the evening fuming.

Adversity: I called up a man I was interested in and invited him to a show. He said he would have to take a rain check because he needed to prepare for a meeting.

Belief: Right, what an excuse. He was just trying to spare my feelings. The truth is he doesn’t want to have anything to do with me. What did I expect? I’m too assertive for him. That’s the last time I’ll ever ask someone out.

Consequences: I felt stupid, embarrassed and ugly. Instead of inviting someone else to go to the show with me, I decided to give the tickets to friends.

Adversity: I decided to join a gym, and when I walked into the place I saw nothing but firm, toned bodies all around me.

Belief: What am I doing here? I look like a beached whale compared to these people! I should get out of here while I still have my dignity.

Consequences: I felt totally self-conscious and ended up leaving after fifteen minutes.

It’s your turn now. Over the next couple of days, record five ABC sequences from your life.

Adversity:

Belief:

Consequences:

Adversity:

Belief:

Consequences:

Adversity:

Belief:

Consequences:

Adversity:

Belief:

Consequences:

Adversity:

Belief:

Consequences:

When you have recorded your five ABC episodes, read them over carefully. Look for the link between your belief and the consequences. What you will see is that pessimistic explanations set off passivity and dejection, whereas optimistic explanations energize.

The next step follows immediately: If you change the habitual beliefs that follow adversity for you, your reaction to adversity will change in lockstep. There are highly reliable ways to change.

**Disputation and Distraction**

THERE ARE TWO general ways for you to deal with your pessimistic beliefs once you are aware of them. The first is simply to distract yourself when they occur—try to think of something else. The second is to dispute them. Disputing is more effective in the long run, because successfully disputed beliefs are less likely to recur when the same situation presents itself again.

Human beings are wired to think about things, bad and good, that attract our attention and place demands on us. This makes a great deal of evolutionary sense. We wouldn’t live very long if we didn’t recognize dangers and needs straight off and if we weren’t primed to worry about how to deal with them. Habitual pessimistic thoughts merely carry this useful process one detrimental step further. They not only grab our attention; they circle unceasingly through our minds. By their very nature they will not allow themselves to be forgotten. They are primitive, biological reminders of needs and of dangers. While evolution seems to have made prepubescent children irrepressible optimists, it has also assured that adults who worried and planned were more likely to survive and have children and have these children survive. But in modern life, these primitive reminders can get in our way, subverting our performance and spoiling the quality of our emotional life.

Let’s examine the difference between distraction and disputation.

**Distraction**

I WANT YOU now not to think about a piece of apple pie with vanilla ice cream. The pie is heated and the ice cream forms a delightful contrast in taste and temperature.

You probably find that you have almost no capacity to refrain from thinking about the pie. But you do have the capacity to redeploy your attention.

Think about the pie again. Got it. Mouth-watering? Now stand up and slam the palm of your hand against the wall and shout “STOP!”

The image of the pie disappeared, didn’t it?

This is one of several simple but highly effective thought-stopping techniques used by people who are trying to interrupt habitual thought patterns. Some people ring a loud bell, others carry a three-by-five card with the word STOP in enormous red letters. Many people find it works well to wear a rubber band around their wrists and snap it hard to stop their ruminating.

If you combine one of these physical techniques with a technique called attention shifting, you will get longer-lasting results. To keep your thoughts from returning to a negative belief after interruption (by snapping a rubber band or whatever), now direct your attention elsewhere. Actors do this when they must suddenly switch from one emotion to another. Try this: Pick up a small object and study it intently for a few seconds. Handle it, put it in your mouth and taste it, smell it, tap it to see how it sounds. You’ll find that concentrating on the object this way will have strengthened your shift in attention.

Finally, you can undercut ruminations by taking advantage of their very nature. Their nature is to circle around in your mind, so that you will not forget them, so that you will act on them. When adversity strikes, schedule some time—later—for thinking things over … say, this evening at six P.M. Now, when something disturbing happens and you find the thoughts hard to stop, you can say to yourself, “Stop. I’ll think this over later … at [such and such a time].”

Also, write the troublesome thoughts down the moment they occur. The combination of jotting them down—which acts to ventilate them and dispose of them—and setting a later time to think about them works well; it takes advantage of the reason ruminations exist—to remind you of themselves—and so undercuts them. If you write them down and set a time to think about them, they no longer have any purpose, and purposelessness lessens their strength.

**Disputation**

DUCKING our disturbing beliefs can be good first aid, but a deeper, more lasting remedy is to dispute them: Give them an argument. Go on the attack. By effectively disputing the beliefs that follow adversity, you can change your customary reaction from dejection and giving up to activity and good cheer.

Adversity: I recently started taking night classes after work for a master’s degree. I got my first set of exams back and I didn’t do nearly as well as I wanted.

Belief: What awful grades, Judy. I no doubt did the worst in the class. I’m just stupid. That’s all. I might as well face facts. I’m also just too old to be competing with these kids. Even if I stick with it, who is going to hire a forty-year-old woman when they can hire a twenty-three-year-old instead? What was I thinking when I enrolled? It’s just too late for me.

Consequences: I felt totally dejected and useless. I was embarrassed I even gave it a try, and decided I should withdraw from my courses and be satisfied with the job I have.

Disputation: I’m blowing things out of proportion. I hoped to get all As, but I got a B, a B +, and a B−. Those aren’t awful grades. I may not have done the best in the class, but I didn’t do the worst in the class either. I checked. The guy next to me had two Cs and a D +. The reason I didn’t do as well as I hoped isn’t because of my age. The fact that I am forty doesn’t make me any less intelligent than anyone else in the class. One reason I may not have done as well is because I have a lot of other things going on in my life that take time away from my studies. I have a full-time job. I have a family. I think that given my situation I did a good job on my exams. Now that I took this set of exams I know how much work I need to put into my studies in the future in order to do even better. Now is not the time to worry about who will hire me. Almost everyone who graduates from this program gets a decent job. For now I need to concern myself with learning the material and earning my degree. Then when I graduate I can focus on finding a better job.

Outcome: I felt much better about myself and my exams. I’m not going to withdraw from my courses, and I am not going to let my age stand in the way of getting what I want. I’m still concerned that my age may be a disadvantage, but I will cross that bridge if and when I come to it.

Judy effectively disputed her beliefs about her grades. By doing so she changed her feelings from despair into hope and her course of action from withdrawal into plunging ahead. Judy knows some techniques that you are about to learn.

**Distancing**

IT IS ESSENTIAL to realize your beliefs are just that—beliefs. They may or may not be facts. If a jealous rival shrieked at you in a rage, “You are a terrible mother. You are selfish, inconsiderate, and stupid,” how would you react? You probably wouldn’t take the accusations much into account. If they got under your skin, you would dispute them (either to her face or to yourself). “My kids love me,” you might say. “I spend ungodly amounts of time with them. I teach them algebra, football, and how to get on in a tough world. Anyway she’s just jealous because her kids have turned out so poorly.”

We can more or less easily distance ourselves from the unfounded accusations of others. But we are much worse at distancing ourselves from the accusations that we launch—daily—at ourselves. After all, if we think them about ourselves, they must be true.

Wrong!

What we say to ourselves when we face a setback can be just as baseless as the ravings of a jealous rival. Our reflexive explanations are usually distortions. They are mere bad habits of thought produced by unpleasant experiences in the past—by childhood conflicts, by strict parents, by an overly critical Little League coach, by a big sister’s jealousy. But because they seem to issue from ourselves, we treat them as gospel.

They are merely beliefs, however. And just believing something doesn’t make it so. Just because a person fears that he is unemployable, unlovable, or inadequate doesn’t mean it’s true. It is essential to stand back and suspend belief for a moment, to distance yourself from our pessimistic explanations at least long enough to verify their accuracy. Checking out the accuracy of our reflexive beliefs is what disputation is all about.

The first step is just knowing your beliefs warrant dispute. The next step is putting disputation into practice.

**Learning to Argue with Yourself**

FORTUNATELY, you already have a lifetime of experience in disputation. You use this skill whenever you argue with other people. Once you get started disputing your own unfounded accusations about yourself, your old skills will kick in for use in this new project.

There are four important ways to make your disputations convincing.

• Evidence?

• Alternatives?

• Implications?

• Usefulness?

**Evidence**

THE MOST CONVINCING way of disputing a negative belief is to show that it is factually incorrect. Much of the time you will have facts on your side, since pessimistic reactions to adversity are so often overreactions. You adopt the role of a detective and ask, “What is the evidence for this belief?”

Judy did this. She believed that her “awful” grades were the “worst in the class.” She checked the evidence. The person sitting next to her had much lower grades.

Katie, who allegedly “blew” her diet, could count up the calories in the nachos, the chicken wings, and the Lite Beers and find that they came to little more than the dinner she skipped to go out with her friends.

It is important to see the difference between this approach and the so-called “power of positive thinking.” Positive thinking often involves trying to believe upbeat statements such as “Every day, in every way, I’m getting better and better” in the absence of evidence, or even in the face of contrary evidence. If you can actually believe such statements, more power to you. Many educated people, trained in skeptical thinking, cannot manage this kind of boosterism. Learned optimism, in contrast, is about accuracy.

We have found that merely repeating positive statements to yourself does not raise mood or achievement very much, if at all. It is how you cope with negative statements that has an effect. Usually the negative beliefs that follow adversity are inaccurate. Most people catastrophize: From all the potential causes, they select the one with the direst implications. One of your most effective techniques in disputation will be to search for evidence pointing to the distortions in your catastrophic explanations. Most of the time you will have reality on your side.

Learned optimism works not through an unjustifiable positivity about the world but through the power of “non-negative” thinking.

**Alternatives**

ALMOST NOTHING that happens to you has just one cause; most events have many causes. If you did poorly on a test, all of the following might have contributed: how hard the test was, how much you studied, how smart you are, how fair the professor is, how the other students did, how tired you were. Pessimists have a way of latching onto the worst of all these possible causes—the most permanent, pervasive, and personal one. Judy picked “I’m too old to be competing with these kids.”

Here again, disputation usually has reality on its side. There are multiple causes, so why latch onto the most insidious one? Ask yourself, “Is there any less destructive way to look at this?” Judy, an experienced self-disputer, easily found that there was: “I have a full-time job and I have a family.” Katie, who also became an ace self-disputer, could change “weakness” into “Look at how strong I am in keeping at this diet so strictly for two whole weeks.”

To dispute your own beliefs, scan for all possible contributing causes. Focus on the changeable (not enough time spent studying), the specific (this particular exam was uncharacteristically hard) and the nonpersonal (the professor graded unfairly) causes. You may have to push hard at generating alternative beliefs, latching onto possibilities you are not fully convinced are true. Remember that much of pessimistic thinking consists in just the reverse, latching onto the most dire possible belief, not because the evidence supports it, but precisely because it is so dire. Your job is to undo this destructive habit by becoming skilled at generating alternatives.

**Implications**

BUT THE WAY things go in this world, the facts won’t always be on your side. The negative belief you hold about yourself may be correct. In this situation, the technique to use is decatastrophizing.

Even if my belief is correct, you say to yourself, what are its implications? Judy was older than the rest of the students. But what does that imply? It doesn’t mean that Judy is any less intelligent than they are, and it doesn’t mean that nobody would want to hire her. Katie’s breaking her diet doesn’t imply she’s a total glutton, it doesn’t imply she’s a fool, and it certainly doesn’t mean she should let her diet unravel completely.

How likely, you should ask yourself, are those awful implications? How likely is it that three Bs mean no one will ever hire Judy? Do a couple of chicken wings and nachos really mean Katie is a total glutton? Once you ask if the implications are really that awful, repeat the search for evidence. Katie remembered the evidence that she had stuck to a strict diet for two whole weeks—so she was hardly a total glutton. Judy remembered that almost everyone who got a master’s degree from her program got a decent job.

**Usefulness**

SOMETIMES the consequences of holding a belief matter more than the truth of the belief. Is the belief destructive? Katie’s belief in her gluttony, even if true, is destructive. It is a recipe for letting go of her diet completely.

Some people get very upset when the world shows itself not to be fair. We can sympathize with that sentiment, but the belief that the world should be fair may cause more grief than it’s worth. What good will it do me to dwell on that? At times it is very useful, instead, to get on with your day, without taking the time to examine the accuracy of your beliefs and then disputing them. For example, a technician doing bomb demolition might find himself thinking, “This could go off and I might be killed”—with the result that his hands start to shake. In this case I would recommend distraction over disputation. Whenever you simply have to perform now, you will find distraction the tool of choice. At this moment the question to ask yourself is not “Is the belief true?” but “Is it functional for me to think it right now?” If the answer is no, use the distraction techniques. (Stop! Assign a later worry time. Make a written note of the thought.)

Another tactic is to detail all the ways you can change the situation in the future. Even if the belief is true now, is the situation changeable? How can you go about changing it?

**Your Disputation Record**

Now I want you to practice the ABCDE model. You already know what ABC stands for. D is for disputation; E is for energization.

During the next five adverse events you face, listen closely for your beliefs, observe the consequences, and dispute your beliefs vigorously. Then observe the energization that occurs as you succeed in dealing with the negative beliefs, and record all of this. These five adverse events can be minor: The mail is late; your call isn’t returned; the kid pumping gas doesn’t wash the windshield. In each of these, use the four techniques of effective self-disputation.

Before you start, study the examples below.

Adversity: I borrowed a pair of really expensive earrings from my friend, and I lost one of them while I was out dancing.

Belief: I am so irresponsible. They were Kay’s favorite earrings, and of course I go and lose one. She is going to be so absolutely furious at me. Not that she doesn’t have every reason. If I were her, I’d hate me too. I just can’t believe how much of a klutz I am. I wouldn’t be surprised if she told me she didn’t want to have anything to do with me anymore.

Consequences: I felt totally sick. I was ashamed and embarrassed, and I didn’t want to call and tell her what happened. Basically, I just sat around feeling stupid for a while, trying to muster up the guts to call her.

Disputation: Well, it is really unfortunate that I lost the earring. They were Kay’s favorites [evidence] and she probably will be very disappointed [implication]. However, she will realize it was an accident [alternative], and I seriously doubt she will hate me because of this [implication]. I don’t think it’s accurate to label myself as totally irresponsible just because I lost an earring [implication].

Energization: I still felt bad about losing her earring, but I didn’t feel nearly as ashamed, and I wasn’t worried that she would end the friendship over it. I was able to relax and call her to explain.

Here’s one you saw the first half of before.

Adversity: I came home early from work and found my son and his friends hanging out in the garage smoking pot.

Belief: What does he think he’s doing? I’m going to strangle him! This just goes to show how irresponsible he is. I can’t trust him at all. Everything out of his mouth is just one lie after another. Well, I’m not going to listen to any of it.

Consequences: I was out-of-my-mind angry at him. I refused even to discuss the situation. I told him he was “an untrustworthy little delinquent,” and I spent the rest of the evening fuming.

But here’s how an ace disputer would conclude this internal dialogue:

Disputation: Okay, it is definitely true Joshua is irresponsible to smoke pot, but this doesn’t mean he is totally irresponsible and untrustworthy [implications]. He has never cut school or stayed out late without calling, and he has been good about doing his share around the house [evidence]. This is a very serious situation, but it is not helpful to assume that everything he says is a lie [usefulness]. Our communication in the past has been okay, and I think if I remain calm now, things will go better [usefulness]. If I am not willing to discuss the situation with Joshua, things cannot be resolved [usefulness].

Energization: I was able to settle down and begin to handle the situation. I began by apologizing for calling him “untrustworthy,” and I told him we needed to talk about his smoking pot. The conversation did get fairly heated at times, but at least we were talking.

Adversity: I threw a dinner party for a group of friends, and the person I was trying to impress barely touched her food.

Belief: The food tastes putrid. I am such a lousy cook. I might as well forget getting to know her any better. I’m lucky she didn’t get up and leave in the middle of dinner. Consequences: I felt really disappointed and angry at myself. I was so embarrassed about my cooking that I wanted to avoid her for the rest of the night. Obviously, things weren’t going as I had hoped.

Disputation: This is ridiculous. I know the food doesn’t taste putrid [evidence]. She may not have eaten very much but everyone else did [evidence]. There could be a hundred reasons why she didn’t eat much [alternatives]. She could be on a diet, she might not have been feeling great, she might just have a small appetite [alternatives]. Even though she didn’t eat much, she did seem to enjoy the dinner [evidence]. She told some funny stories, and she seemed to be relaxed [evidence]. She even offered to help me with the dishes [evidence]. She wouldn’t have done that if she was repulsed by me [alternative].

Energization: I didn’t feel nearly as embarrassed or angry, and I realized that if I avoided her, then I really would hurt my chances of getting to know her better. Basically, I was able to relax and not let my imagination ruin the evening for me.

Now you do it, in your daily life over the next week. Don’t search out adversity, but as it comes along, tune in carefully to your internal dialogue. When you hear the negative beliefs, dispute them. Beat them into the ground. Then record the ABCDE.

Adversity:

Belief:

Consequences:

Disputation:

Energization:

Adversity:

Belief:

Consequences:

Disputation:

Energization:

Adversity:

Belief:

Consequences:

Disputation:

Energization:

Adversity:

Belief:

Consequences:

Disputation:

Energization:

Adversity:

Belief:

Consequences:

Disputation:

Energization:

**The Externalization of Voices**

IN ORDER to practice disputation, you don’t have to wait for adversity to strike. You can have a friend provide the negative beliefs for you out loud, and then you dispute his accusations, also out loud. This exercise is called “externalization of voices.” To do it, choose a friend (your spouse might do fine) and set aside twenty minutes. Your friend’s job is to criticize you. For this reason, you have to choose your friend carefully. Choose someone you trust with your feelings and around whom you don’t get defensive.

Explain to your friend that in this situation it is all right to criticize you: You won’t take it personally because this is an exercise to strengthen the way you dispute such criticisms when you make them to yourself. Help your friend choose the right kinds of criticisms by going over your ABC record with him, pointing out the negative beliefs that afflict you repeatedly. With these understandings reached, you’ll find that you don’t, in fact, take the criticisms personally when your friend makes them, and that the exercise can actually strengthen the bond of sympathy between you and your friend.

Your job is to dispute the criticisms out loud, with all the armaments you have. Marshal all the contrary evidence you can find, spell out all the alternative explanations, decatastrophize by arguing that the implications are not nearly as dire as your friend charges. If you believe the accusation is true now, detail all the things you can do to change the situation. Your friend can interrupt to dispute your disputing. Then you should reply.

Before you start, you and your friend should read the following examples. Each contains a situation that the friend exploits in order to make some nasty accusations. (Your friend must be rough on you, because in your own explanatory style you’ve been rough on yourself.)

Situation: While Carol is putting away some clothes in her fifteen-year-old daughter’s bedroom, she finds a packet of birth-control pills hidden under some clothes.

Accusation (by friend): How could this be going on without your knowing it? She’s only fifteen years old. You weren’t even dating when you were fifteen years old. How could you be so blind to what your daughter is up to? Your relationship must be completely awful if you weren’t even aware that Susan is sexually active. What kind of mother are you?

Disputation: Well, it doesn’t help to compare when I was a teenager to Susan’s experiences [usefulness]. Times have changed. It’s a different world these days [alternative]. It’s true that I had no idea that Susan was sleeping with someone [evidence], but this doesn’t mean our relationship is totally awful [implications]. My discussions with her about birth control must have gotten through, because she is on the pill [evidence]. That’s a good sign at least.

Friend interrupts: You’re so caught up in your own life and so busy with work that you have no idea what is going on in your own daughter’s life. You’re a rotten mother.

Disputation continues: I have been preoccupied lately with my work, and maybe I haven’t been as in tune with her as I’d like [alternatives], but I can change that [usefulness]. Instead of flying off the handle about this, or getting down on myself, I can use this situation to reopen the lines of communication between us and discuss sex and any concerns she may have [usefulness]. It won’t be easy at first. I expect she’ll be a bit defensive, but we can make it work.

Situation: The pessimist in this case is a man named Doug. He and his girlfriend, Barbara, go to a dinner party at a friend’s house. Barbara spends part of the evening talking to Nick, a man Doug has never met before. In the car on the way home, Doug can’t keep himself from remarking bitingly, “You and that guy seemed to have a lot in common. I haven’t seen you so excited in a long time. I hope you got his number—it would be a shame to let that friendship die.” Barbara is surprised by Doug’s reaction and laughingly tells him he needn’t be so insecure; Nick is just a friend from work.

Accusation (by friend): It was really rude of Barbara to spend the whole night talking and laughing with someone else. These were a group of her friends, and she knew you’d be the odd man out.

Disputation: I think I’m overreacting a bit. She didn’t spend the entire night talking with Nick [evidence]. We were at the party for four hours and she probably spoke to him for forty-five minutes or so [evidence]. Just because I had never met a lot of the people before doesn’t mean she’s responsible for baby-sitting me [alternative]. She did spend the first hour introducing me to her friends, and it wasn’t until after dinner that she spent some time alone with Nick [evidence]. I guess she feels secure enough about us that she doesn’t have to cling to me all the time [alternative]. She knows I can mingle and meet people on my own [evidence].

Friend interrupts: If she really cared for you, she wouldn’t have spent the night flirting with that guy. You obviously care for her more than she cares for you. If that’s how she feels, you might as well call it quits.

Disputation continues: I know Barbara loves me [evidence]. We’ve been together for a long time, and she has never once mentioned splitting up or seeing other people [evidence]. She’s right, I was probably just feeling a little nervous about meeting so many new people at one time [alternative]. I ought to apologize for being so sarcastic with her and explain to her why I reacted as I did [usefulness].

Situation: Andrew’s wife, Lori, is an alcoholic. For three years she did not touch any alcohol, but recently she has started drinking again. Andrew has been trying everything he can to get her to stop: He’s tried to reason with her, he’s threatened her, he’s pleaded with her. But each night when he comes home from work, Lori is drunk.

Accusation (by friend): This is awful. You should be able to make Lori stop drinking. You should have realized something was bothering her way before things got as far as they have. How could you have been so blind? Why can’t you make her see what she is doing to herself?

Disputation: It would be great if I could make Lori stop drinking, but that isn’t realistic [evidence]. Last time I went through this with her I learned there’s absolutely nothing I can do to make her stop [evidence]. Until she decides she wants to get off the bottle, there is nothing I can do to make her see what she doesn’t want to see [alternative]. This doesn’t mean I’m helpless in terms of dealing with my own feelings about this [implication]. I can start going to a support group so that I don’t fall into the trap of blaming myself again [usefulness].

Friend interrupts: You thought things were good between the two of you. I guess you’ve been deluding yourself for the last three years. Your marriage must mean nothing to her.

Disputation continues: Just because Lori has started to drink again, that doesn’t totally discount the last three years of our marriage [alternative]. Things were good between us [evidence], and they will get better again. This is her problem [alternative], and I just have to keep telling myself that, over and over again [usefulness]. She’s not drinking because of anything I did or didn’t do [alternative]. The best thing I can do right now for both of us is to talk to someone about how this is affecting me and what my concerns and worries are [usefulness]. It’s going to be a bitch to get through this, but I am willing to give it a try.

Situation: Brenda and her sister Andrea have always been very close. They went to the same schools, traveled in the same circles, settled down in the same neighborhood. Andrea’s son is a freshman at Dartmouth, and both Andrea and Brenda are excited about helping Joey, Brenda’s son, start researching the colleges he wants to attend. At the beginning of his senior year in high school, Joey tells his parents he doesn’t want to go to college; instead he wants to restore houses and work in construction. When Andrea asks Brenda why Joey doesn’t want to go to college, Brenda loses control and snaps, “Not that it is any of your business, but not everyone has to follow in your son’s footsteps.”

Accusation (by friend): You ought to be sick and tired of everything in your life being an open book to Andrea. She has her own family. There is no reason for her to be constantly nosing around in your life.

Disputation: I think you are overreacting just a wee bit. All Andrea did was ask why Joey has decided not to go to college [evidence]. That’s a fair question [alternative]. I would feel I could ask her that question if the situation were the other way around and it was her son, not mine, who’d decided not to go to college [evidence].

Friend interrupts: She thinks she is superior to you because her son is going to Dartmouth and Joey isn’t. Well, you most certainly don’t need that kind of attitude from your sister, so she can just buzz off.

Disputation continues: She wasn’t acting superior or rubbing my face in it; she’s just concerned because she cares about Joey a great deal [alternative]. I guess I am feeling defensive about Joey’s decision and envious of where Brenda’s son is [alternative]. Actually, I am proud of how close Andrea and I are. Sure, every once in a while things get competitive, but I wouldn’t trade our closeness for the world [usefulness].

Situation: Donald is a senior in college. His father died four years ago after a long illness. While Donald is home for Christmas, his mother tells him she is going to marry Geoff, a man she has been seeing for a few months. Donald knew she was involved with Geoff, but he is totally surprised by her plans for marriage. When Donald does not respond to her announcement, his mother asks him what he thinks. Donald explodes with “It is absolutely disgusting that you are going to marry that creep” and storms out of the house.

Accusation (by friend): I can’t believe your mom is going to marry that guy. She barely knows him, he’s way too old, and he’s totally wrong for her. How could she do this to you?

Disputation: Hold on a second. Are things really as bad as that? First of all, I don’t know how well she knows Geoff [evidence]. I’ve been away at school all year [evidence]. They’ve only known each other a few months, but for all I know they may spend every minute together [alternative]. And the stuff about him being too old is silly [evidence]. He’s only ten years older; my dad was thirteen years older than Mom [evidence].

Friend interrupts: How could she do this to your dad? Your dad just died, and already she’s replacing him with someone else. That makes me sick. What kind of woman is she that she could do such a lousy thing?

Disputation continues: Mom does seem happier than she has in a very long time [evidence]. I guess what’s really bothering me is I still miss Dad so much, and I can’t understand how Mom could have gotten over him enough to have fallen in love again [alternative]. Maybe I’ll talk to her about that. The fact is, Dad has been dead for four years [evidence], and whether I like it or not, Mom has to move on [alternative]. I don’t want to see her alone. In a way, it’s kind of a relief [implications]. Now I don’t have to worry about her being lonely. I mean, it’s not that she’s replacing Dad, she’s just found someone else who makes her happy [alternative]. I bet Dad would be glad [evidence]. He wouldn’t want her to never feel love again [evidence]. It’s just that this came as such a surprise to me [alternative]. I think I’ll feel a little better about this once I get to know Geoff [usefulness]. I sure hope he’s a good guy.

Okay. You do it now.

**Review**

YOU SHOULD NOW be well on your way to using disputation, the prime technique for learned optimism, in your daily life. You first saw the ABC link—that specific beliefs lead to dejection and passivity. Emotions and actions do not usually follow adversity directly. Rather they issue directly from your beliefs about adversity. This means that if you change your mental response to adversity, you can cope with setbacks much better.

The main tool for changing your interpretations of adversity is disputation. Practice disputing your automatic interpretations all the time from now on. Anytime you find yourself down or anxious or angry, ask what you are saying to yourself. Sometimes the beliefs will turn out to be accurate; when this is so, concentrate on the ways you can alter the situation and prevent adversity from becoming disaster. But usually your negative beliefs are distortions. Challenge them. Don’t let them run your emotional life. Unlike dieting, learned optimism is easy to maintain once you start. Once you get into the habit of disputing negative beliefs, your daily life will run much better, and you will feel much happier.