

Program Name: "Learned Optimism" by Martin E.P. Seligman, Ph.D.

Your name and date: Carrie Hess 9/27/02

Program Evaluation Template - This template is to be used as an evaluation tool during our program investigation. The questions are designed to assist in determining what elements of each program we want to consider for incorporation into our programs. Feel free to add additional notes as you use the template. This template is the foundation for your presentation about the program you have researched. (Version #3)

Program or Concept Purpose or Mission Statement:

It has been discovered that there are positive human traits such as courage, optimism, future-mindedness, hope, honesty, perseverance, and work ethic, that provide a buffer against mental illness. Martin Seligman, in his book "Learned Optimism", sees the goal of this century to be the creation of a "science of human strength, whose mission will be to understand and learn how to foster positive virtues in young people, to focus on the prevention of mental illness and depression rather than treating it." Depression follows from a pessimistic way of thinking about failure and loss. Learning how to think more optimistically when we fail gives us a permanent skill for warding off depression. The main effect of this new, more positive way of thinking will be the ability "to build the qualities that help individuals and communities not just endure and survive - but also flourish."

Principles or Values: (implicit or expressed)

Learned Optimism is a key component in the Positive Psychology movement. Previously, there have been two accepted ways of thinking about depression - psychoanalytically and biomedically. According to Seligman, neither approach is effective in treating the American epidemic of pessimism and its most serious consequence - depression. Studies show that pessimists give up more easily and get depressed more often. Optimists tend to persevere in the face of adversity and so do better in school and at work. They are in better health, tend to age well and evidence suggests that they may even live longer. Despite the most deeply rooted pessimism, Seligman believes, pessimists can learn to be optimists by practicing a new set of cognitive skills that will enable them to take charge, resist depression, make themselves feel better and accomplish more. Once learned, these new skills are permanent and self-reinforcing.

Program Structure or Key Points:

There are two ways of thinking about failure: optimistically and pessimistically

Failure can occur when either talent or desire is missing. Failure can also occur when talent and desire are abundant but optimism is missing. Therefore, how we feel about failure has a profound effect on our resilience and ability to go on in the face of adversity. A key factor in how we perceive our own setbacks is referred to as our "Explanatory Style" or the way we explain to ourselves the cause and consequence of our failure.

Dimensions of explanatory style include:

- Permanence
 - Temporary - refers to instances of "sometimes" and "lately" (optimist) "I haven't done my best work lately"
 - Permanent - refers to "always" and "never" (pessimist) "My work will never be good enough"
- Pervasiveness
 - Specific - helplessness only in troubled areas (optimist) "Soccer isn't my best sport"

Global - helplessness in many or all situations (pessimist) "I'm a lousy athlete"

Central to this internal dialogue is hope versus hopelessness and helplessness versus voluntary control.

➤ Personalization

External causes - blames others (optimist)

Internal causes - blames oneself (pessimist)

Changing from Pessimism to Optimism

Certain kinds of beliefs cause helplessness and the desire to give up in the face of adversity. The first step in interrupting this cycle is to identify the connection between adversity, belief and consequence (ABC's). The second step is to identify how the ABC's operate in your own life.

Example: **Adversity** - Someone zips into a parking place you've been waiting for.

Belief - You think, "that idiot believes he's better than me."

Consequence - You honk your horn angrily and roll down your window, shouting until he's moved beyond the sound of your voice.

Or

Adversity - Someone zips into a parking place you've been waiting for.

Belief - You think, "I guess he didn't see me waiting here."

Consequence - You go find another place to park.

The primary technique of developing more positive ways of explaining (internally) life's setbacks is referred to as **disputation**. First you identify your pessimistic beliefs, then you dispute them. Once you've changed your mental response to adversity, you can more easily rise above it.

Describe a successful participant.

A successful participant would be one who is open to exploring and identifying their beliefs about adversity and is willing to practice disputing those beliefs in order to develop more positive ways of explaining life's setbacks to themselves.

Complete the table below.

| Program Approach (Application) | Method (How it's used?) | Outcome (What would it look at COTS?) | Measurement (How do we measure success?) |
|--|---|---|---|
| Human Growth & Transformation | The mission of this program is to foster optimism and resiliency in order to empower individuals to better cope with adversity and ward off depression. | Staff and clients would feel more competent in coping and conquering the setbacks we all experience in our lives. | Success would be measured by anecdotal evidence that clients are using the principals to overcome adversity in their lives. |
| Staff Interaction with Clients | Principles would be integrated into ongoing discussions between staff and clients. Staff integration of principles of Learned Optimism would be a way of modeling how it "looks". | Staff could also use and benefit from the integration of the Learned Optimism concepts into their own lives. | As above. |
| Client-to-Client Interaction | Clients could practice their "ABC's" with each other in an effort to support one another's personal growth. | | As above. |

| | | | |
|--------------------------------|---|--|------------------|
| <p>Client Self-Help</p> | <p>Nearly endless possibility for self-help. Clients take on the responsibility for improving their capacity for optimism in their journey of self-sufficiency.</p> | <p>Clients who practice Learned Optimism would add to their bank of positive experience and improve their ability to navigate through times of stress and adversity.</p> | <p>As above.</p> |
|--------------------------------|---|--|------------------|

Does this promote a responsible and accountable lifestyle? How?

Yes. It encourages participants to be accountable for the disputation of their own thoughts and beliefs. By identifying their beliefs and how they perceive adversity in their lives they can better address the cause and consequence of events in their own lives and realize that they have the power to choose the way they think.

What would you change to make the program or concept more useful in our setting?

I would like to see it used as one element in the larger picture of empowering ourselves and our clients in the recognition of ways in which we sabotage and also facilitate our journey in this life.

Additional Issues:

- **Staffing Requirements** (Any additional staff? Any staff training requirements?)
No additional staff required. Staff training may be necessary to reinforce key elements of the program.
- **Aftercare**
Monthly check-ins for three to six months.
- **Costs**
Cost of the book and training.

Additional Comments (Tell us what you really think.)

What makes you like this program or concept? What is the minimum level or entry point for clients? What makes it appealing or motivating to the clients? How would you sell this to the clients?
The ability to transform our inner beliefs about the world and ourselves, from largely pessimistic to a more optimistic outlook, appeals to me. I think that by increasing our capacity to approach the world optimistically while also lowering our expectations, we can all experience success and competence in our

lives. Having a bank of positive and successful experiences from which to draw from is critical in having the courage to take those next steps forward. The minimum level of entry for anyone would be the willingness to hear about the program, talk about it and experiment with it's integration into their own way of thinking and approaching the world. As a case manager, I would integrate the principals of Learned Optimism into ongoing discussions we're already having about how to nurture ourselves while taking a proactive role in setting goals, overcoming obstacles and navigating our own course on the path to self-sufficiency.

What makes you feel uneasy about this program or concept?

Initially I was uneasy about the lack of personal responsibility that might result from attributing failures to external causes. Seligman addressed this towards the end of the book by asserting that this was *internal dialogue* aimed at boosting self-esteem and optimism in order to ward off depression. He also believes that "if we want people to change, internality is not as crucial as the permanence dimension is." I also felt this program minimized the difficulty some adults would have in leaving their comfort zone in order to change their *set point* from pessimism to optimism.

Sources:

Learned Optimism - How to Change Your Mind and Your Life, Martin E.P. Seligman Ph.D.

Positive Psychology, Positive Prevention, and Positive Therapy, Martin E.P. Seligman, Positive Psychology Chapter
(see <http://www.positivepsychology.org/ppsnnyderchapter.htm>)