



# Helpful and Helpless Optimism



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## Opinion

Optimism refers to a generalized positive outcome expectancy and/or a positive causal attribution [1]. It is one of the most enduring characteristics of a person with significant implications for individual well-being and mental health [2]. However, optimism seems not universally beneficial.

Active-anticipation and self-enhancement are important active components in the concept of optimism. Self-enhancement (e.g., "If I get promoted, I think it was due to my effort and ability") refers to attributing successes or good events to personal, permanent, and pervasive causes and learning from them [3]. Meanwhile, the positive expectation (e.g., "I will finish my task by 3 o'clock" and "If a method I used in my work failed, I regard it as stepping closer to success") may actively and even aggressively self-fulfill a good expectation [4]. These active components may have significant implications for individual well-being and mental health because of the feeling of being in control of their destiny or being self-regulated by a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The passive component of optimism is self-protection and unrealistic optimism. Self-protection (e.g., "when a project is not finished successfully, I think it is due to systematical fault, while my performance is good") refers to attributing bad events to external, unstable, and specific causes [4]. Since bad events are not attributed to self-related causes, it may lead people to feel better, and hence may be more motivated towards future goals. However, it was demonstrated not to serve the "self" when there was conflict between this kind of "self-serving" and the situation, such as found in self-protection in managers with high social hierarchies [5]. The bad outcomes indicated that people are not in control of some critical resources to achieve a better result. Although it may be due to external and unstable causes, it leads to impressions of powerlessness. Thus, self-protection can be both functional and dysfunctional.

Unrealistic optimism involves an error in judgment implying a hopeful outlook [6]. Although unrealistic optimism does add to self-esteem and mental health [7], it is dysfunctional and criticized as overemphasizing the positive and involving an illusion of invulnerability, which can hinder the prevention of

bad outcomes (see the positive-negative asymmetry theory, [8]). Some researchers suggested that optimism must be realistic to be effective [9]. Unrealistic optimism, in this tone, is easily regarded as largely an abnormal illusion in human nature, which prevents people from achieving "a more accurate perception of the hard facts of reality" and hence being "more conducive to healthy psychological functioning" [1]. This idea was supported by many early philosophers and psychiatrists.

Based on Seligman's [3] explanatory style model, Carver & Scheier's [4] self-regulatory model, and the construe of unrealistic optimism [2,8,9], a comprehensive theoretical construction for optimism should deal with optimisms of different time framing, and optimisms with or without bias. Such comprehensive models and measures on helpful and helpless optimism would have rich implications for both theory and practice.

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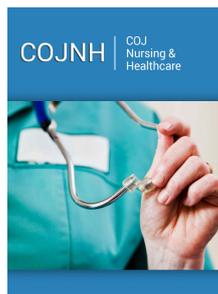
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