

## Learned Optimism

As a coach, you know the influence of positive psychology and its focus on what enables people to flourish, feel engaged, and be happy in life. You know the benefits of emphasizing what is right about people versus what is wrong. Positive psychology offers important applications for coaching, especially related to the issue of reframing mentioned earlier in the chapter.

Martin Seligman (2006), known as the father of positive psychology, observed that people have either a pessimistic lens or an optimistic lens that colors their thoughts and, in turn, impacts courage, willingness, or the perceived ability to make a change. He described three explanatory styles or ways of perceiving setbacks. People might see things as temporary or permanent, local or widespread, and caused by internal or external causes. The skill of reframing may include helping your clients self-observe to identify which style they are using.

These explanatory styles can manifest in various ways. Pessimists may say, "I'll never be able to lose this weight." Optimists may see the temporary nature of the problem: "I will lose this weight in the next 6 months." Pessimists might see things as pervasive: "I'm not a successful person." Optimists might say, "I'm overweight, yes, but it doesn't mean I'm not successful. I've accomplished many things in my life." Pessimists might take things personally: "She mistreated me because I'm overweight." Optimists may say, "She was considerate to ask if I needed a larger chair."

The good news is that optimism can be learned. Our discussion here is about helping clients reframe their thinking and learn new ways to view setbacks, so that hope and confidence can flourish. We are not suggesting that reframing is a quick fix, but you may find that small doses in a single MI-consistent coaching conversation can significantly help with low confidence. Learning to shift a client's mindset might become a focus over several sessions.

If you are interested in expanding your personal and professional skills on this topic, we refer you to Seligman's book *Learned Optimism* (2006). His premise is that anyone can learn optimism and develop techniques for breaking the inclination to say "I give up."