

How to 'do' a good day

By Rod Matthews

Part 2 – The courage to change your attitude

How to change your attitude.

There is an excellent book called *Learned Optimism* by Dr. Martin Seligman. This is not a new-age 'prepare for rebirthing by aligning your chakras and feng shui-ing your bathroom' type book. It is the result of many years of studies and experiments in clinical psychology. Its conclusions are highly respected in the academic community and many individuals would testify to a better, happier life today as a result of learning the skills outlined in the book.

Martin Seligman starts by identifying that it is a provable fact that optimists live longer, experience fewer health problems and are wealthier. Whether this is a cause or effect is not important. What is important is that there is an undeniable correlation. One goes with the other. So if you would like more health, more wealth and more happiness you might be interested in his discoveries.

It turns out that helplessness is learned. If you rob people of the opportunity to help themselves often enough they will no longer help themselves. Even when the situation changes and helping themselves would work, people stop trying. They learn how to be helpless.

Doubtless you have seen this where you work. People who have tried a number of times, have been thwarted by powers greater than them and finally have become so cynical and pessimistic that they stop trying. Many of these people not only stop trying, they also want to stop others trying as well. Phrases like 'That won't work,' or 'We've tried that and it didn't work' and 'You can't do that' are often heard coming from the mouths of people who have learned helplessness in the workplace.

What Dr Seligman has found is that there is a pattern that forms with people who are resilient (people who are slower to learn helplessness) and people who are not resilient (people who are quicker to learn helplessness). Some people seem to have the ability to bounce back from bad events, while others dwell on them and allow them to become an excuse for not trying.

The pattern is to do with the way that people describe the event to themselves. The specific words that they choose to use will either help increase their resilience or actively work against it. It is the language, not the trigger or event that will make you resilient and optimistic.

The language used will have the following elements to it:

- Permanence
- Pervasiveness
- Personalisation

Let's look at these one at a time.

Permanence

There are two subsets to permanence:

- Permanent
- Temporary

Negative Trigger – Pessimist – Permanent

When a negative trigger or event happens, the pessimist will use words like 'all,' 'always,' 'every,' 'never' and 'is.' These words are permanent words and when they are used they indicate that the person perceives the negative trigger or event to be unchangeable and constant.

For example:

- 'All managers are frustrated dictators.'
- 'Clients will always want more and management will always want to give less.'
- 'Every time I try I always stuff it up.'
- 'Diets never work.'
- 'Work is a chore.'

Negative Trigger – Optimist – Temporary

When a negative trigger or event happens, the optimist will use words like 'lately,' 'this time,' 'in that meeting' and 'when.' These words are temporary words and when they are used they reflect that the person perceives the negative trigger or event to be fleeting, momentary and a one off event.

For example:

- 'My manager has been acting like a frustrated dictator lately.'
- 'That client was obviously having a rough day.'
- 'I stuffed it up this time.'
- 'Diets don't work when you eat out.'
- 'Work is a chore when you don't like what you are doing.'

Positive Trigger – Pessimist – Temporary

When a positive trigger or event happens, the pessimist will use words like 'once,' 'just that time,' 'in that meeting,' and 'today.' These words are temporary words and when they are used they indicate that the person perceives the positive trigger or event to be fleeting, momentary and a one-off event.

For example:

- 'My manager is listening to me for once!'
- 'You can please some of the clients some of the time.'
- 'Finally! I got it right for once.'
- 'Make hay while the sun does shine.'
- 'Work went well today.'

Positive Trigger – Optimist – Permanent

When a positive trigger or event happens, the optimist will use words like 'all,' 'always,' 'every,' 'never' and 'is.' These words are permanent words and when they are used they indicate that the person perceives the positive trigger or event to be unchangeable and constant.

For example:

- 'My manager is always doing their best.'
- 'I'm good at dealing with difficult clients'
- 'That is easy,' 'That was easy'
- 'This diet is working'
- 'That's why I love my job!'

Pervasiveness

There are two subsets to pervasiveness:

- Global.
- Specific.

Negative Trigger – Pessimist – Global

When a negative trigger or event happens, the pessimist will use words like 'all', 'I'm' or 'any.' These words are global words and when they are used they reflect that the person perceives the negative trigger or event to be pervading all other aspects of their life.

For example:

- 'All politicians are corrupt.'
- 'I'm repulsive.'
- 'Books are useless.'
- 'I'm no good.'

Negative Trigger – Optimist – Specific

When a negative trigger or event happens, the optimist will be more specific. Specific words and sentences reflect that the person perceives the negative trigger or event to be compartmentalised into a one-off event or associated with one person/thing.

For example:

- 'Fred Nerk is corrupt.'
- 'She finds me repulsive.'
- 'This book is not what I'm looking for.'
- 'I seem to be struggling today.'

Positive Trigger – Pessimist – Specific

When a positive trigger or event happens, the pessimist will be more specific. Specific words and sentences reflect that the person perceives the positive event to be compartmentalised into a one-off trigger or event, or associated with one person/thing.

For example:

- 'I'm pretty clever with that stuff.'
- 'My kids did well in their last maths exam.'
- 'I think she likes me.'
- 'I was making him laugh.'

Positive Trigger – Optimist – Global

When a positive trigger or event happens, the optimist will use global words and sentences. Global words reflect that the person perceives the positive trigger or event to be pervading other aspects of their life.

For example:

- 'I'm pretty clever'
- 'My kids are good at maths'
- 'I'm an attractive person'
- 'I make people laugh.'

Personalisation

There are two sub sets to personalisation:

- Internal.
- External.

Negative Trigger – Pessimist – Internal

When a negative trigger or event happens, the pessimist will use words like 'I,' 'I'm,' 'me,' or 'my.' These words are internal words, and when they are used they reflect that the person perceives the negative trigger or event to be linked to themselves.

For example:

- 'I caused that.'
- 'I'm not creative.'
- 'I'm poor.'
- 'If it wasn't for me ...'
- 'My impatience got in the way.'

Negative Trigger – Optimist – External

When a negative trigger or event happens the optimist will use words like 'you,' 'they,' or 'it.' These words are external words and when they are used they reflect that the person perceives the negative trigger or event to be linked to an external person, place or thing.

For example:

- 'You're stupid.'
- 'They are hopeless.'
- 'I'm not very lucky at cards.'
- 'I grew up in a poor house.'

Positive Trigger – Pessimist – External

When a positive trigger or event happens the pessimist will use words like 'you,' 'they,' or 'it.' These words are external words and when they are used they reflect that the person perceives the positive trigger or event to be linked to an external person, place or thing.

For example:

- 'You're the reason we won.'
- 'I was lucky.'
- 'We had Jessica on our team and she's fantastic.'
- 'They were laughing.'
- 'I was bought up in a wealthy house.'

Positive Trigger – Optimist – Internal

When a positive trigger or event happens the optimist will use words like 'I,' 'I'm,' 'me,' or 'my.' These words are internal words and when they are used they reflect that the person perceives the positive trigger or event to be linked to themselves.

For example:

- 'I'm a lucky guy.'
- 'What helped was my ability to ...,'
- '... my wealth ...'
- 'I make people laugh.'

Please note: There is a clear difference between depression and personal responsibility. People who are depressed will need to externalise the causes of negative events to assist with their recovery. People who are not depressed need to take responsibility for their actions. Sometimes optimists do cause bad things to happen and sometimes good things happen without optimists. We are concerned in this article with the pattern of language you use to describe things to yourself and how this influences your behaviours.

I'm sure that you can see how someone continually using the same pattern of pessimistic language to describe what happens to themselves or to others could very easily become cynical, give up trying and become depressed.

Revisiting your maps

With what we have learned about the language of optimism and resilience, revisit the section where you identified triggers, thoughts and feelings and what your attitude would be when bad day and good day triggers happen.

As you revisit the words you chose to describe the triggers and your attitude when these triggers happen, notice your internal talk. Identify words that indicate permanence (permanent/temporary), pervasiveness (global/specific) and personalisation (internal/external). Please do not be concerned if you cannot find as many as I have outlined below in the example. If you have only used a sentence to explain your attitude try expanding that out to a paragraph and see where that leads.

For example:

How I do a bad day	How I do a great day
<p>Triggers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I (internal) have hundreds of emails (global). • Murray (external) walks toward me (internal). • Jean's number comes up on my phone. Jean (external) is calling me (internal). • My (internal) 'To do' list is ridiculously long and weeks old (global). 	<p>Triggers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I (internal) hear my (internal) favourite song (specific) on the radio. • I (internal) arrive at work knowing exactly (specific) the first thing I (internal) will do and I (internal) get that (specific) done. • I (internal) make a someone (external) laugh and smile. • Someone (external) at work pays me (internal) a compliment.
<p>Attitudes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'I (internal) hate my job. Every morning is the same (global permanent). Hundreds (global) of stupid emails that I (internal) have to (permanent) answer. Will this ever end? (global permanent).' • 'Damn! Here comes Murray again (permanent). I know what it will be about. It's always (permanent global) about what I 	<p>Attitudes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'I (internal) love that. That is so cool. I (internal) always (permanent) feel good when I (internal) listen to that (external temporary) song. I (internal) reckon I (internal) could play the guitar riff (specific) on that song with a little practice.' • 'Done! Great. What's next! Today is (temporary) going well (global). I (internal) love it when

<p>(internal) haven't done (global). He'll start to lecture me like it was my fault (permanent global). He (external) drives me crazy (internal) with his continuous (permanent) whinging. Nothing is ever (global permanent) going to be good enough for that guy (external).'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'No! Not Jean! I'm (internal) too busy (global). Every time (global permanent) she (external) phones me (internal) it's always (permanent) about something that is so trivial and stupid (global). She (external) is a vacuum that is constantly (permanent) sucking up my (internal) attention. I (internal) can't afford to waste any time (global) with her(external). I (internal) have bigger fish to fry(global).' • 'I hate work (global). I (internal) never (permanent) seem to make any (global) headway with my (internal) 'To Do' list (specific). The stuff (global) on it is weeks even months old (global). All (global) I (internal) ever (permanent) seem to be doing is fighting other peoples (external) fires (global). I (internal) never (permanent) get time to do what I (internal) want (global), what I (internal) need (global).' 	<p>I (internal) get things done (global). That (specific) was not as hard as I (internal) thought it was going to be. In fact that (specific external) was pretty easy. How often does that happen? You (external) worry about something (global) before you (external) start and then you (external) actually start it and it turns out to be much simpler that you (external) thought. That happens a lot (global).'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'That (external) was funny. Where did that (external) come from? Some days (temporary) the brain (external) just seems to be functioning better (global) than others I (internal) guess. Today (specific temporary) is one of those days. Lets make the most of it (external temporary). I'll (internal) see who else (global) I (internal) can make laugh today (temporary).' • 'That's (external) nice. It's nice that she (external) noticed what I (internal) did (specific) and my contribution (global). I (internal) worked hard on that (specific) and I (internal) felt good about what I (internal) did (specific) so its nice that others(external global) noticed it (specific) as well.'
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How to increase your resilience

Now that we have identified the components of our self-talk (our attitude) in terms of permanence, pervasiveness and personalisation, we are ready to look at how we can toy with these attitudes to increase our resilience, to increase the usefulness of our behaviours and ultimately increase our results.

Seligman identifies some excellent tools to help reduce pessimism and increase optimism and resilience. These are:

- Dialogue
- Disputation
- Distancing
- Distraction

Dialogue

When you are thinking in a way that is not going to help you feel resilient, write down the words you are using and identify the elements of permanence, pervasiveness and personalisation. Try to re-word the dialogue using the opposite sub sets of each category; then notice the difference.

Using one of the examples above ...

'I hate work (global). I (internal) never (permanent) seem to make any (global) headway with my (internal) 'To do' list (specific). The stuff (global) on it is weeks even months old (global). All (global) I (internal) ever (permanent) seem to be doing is fighting other peoples (external) fires (global). I (internal) never (permanent) get time to do what I (internal) want (global), what I (internal) need (global).'

Where the trigger is negative and the number of:

- Permanent words = 3
- Temporary words = 0
- Global words = 8
- Specific words = 1
- Internal words = 6
- External words = 0

We could re-wording this using the opposite sub sets and it might sound like this ...

'Three things (specific external) have happened today (temporary) that made it difficult to make some headway with my 'To do' list. 20% (specific) of the items on my 'To do' list are over 4 weeks old. I (internal) will schedule in 3 hours this afternoon (specific temporary) and find a place where they (external) won't be able to find me (internal). No interruptions (external) will mean I (internal) can get the first 3 things (specific) on my 'To do' list done.

Where the trigger is still negative but the number of:

- Permanent words = 0
- Temporary words = 2
- Global words = 0
- Specific words = 4
- Internal words = 3
- External words = 3

It is easy to imagine how the second statement is far more likely to help us deal with the same situation in a more resilient way.

Disputation

The best form of defence is attack! When you hear yourself thinking in a way that is not going to help you feel resilient, question the accuracy of every word. Imagine that you are your own devil's advocate and argue against the thinking: 'All?' 'Every?' 'Can I think of a time when that wasn't the case?' 'Can I think of what I did/didn't do that helped?' 'What evidence do I have to the contrary?' 'How many alternatives can I create?' 'Is this useful?'

One of the above examples is ...

'I (internal) hate my job. Every morning is the same (global permanent). Hundreds (global) of stupid emails that I (internal) have to (permanent) answer. Will this ever end? (global permanent).'

There are dozens of ways to dispute the accuracy of this statement. For example ...

- 'I hate my job' – The implication here is that I have *always* hated my job. So we could test that by asking:
 - Can you think of a time when you liked or even loved your job?
 - Is it possible to conceive that there could be a time in the future when you might like or even love your job again?

- *'I hate my job'* – *The implication here is also that I hate every aspect of my job. So we could test that by asking:*
 - Can you identify aspects of your job that you do like? If so make a list.
 - What does your job allow you to do that you like?
 - What have you achieved in your job that gives you a sense of satisfaction?
 - What aspects of your job helps other people or contributes in a meaningful way?
- *'Every morning is the same'* – Every morning?
 - When did you last arrived at work and did not dwell on the number of emails you got?
 - The same? What was different about yesterday?
- *'Hundreds of stupid emails'*
 - How many exactly?
 - Which emails are not stupid?
 - Which emails are important?
 - Which are interesting?
 - Which are entertaining?
- *'That I have to answer'*
 - How many do you delete without having to take action?
 - How many do you delete without even having to read?
 - How many do you pass on to others without answering?
 - Who else can answer them?
 - What would happened if you didn't answer that one? What would happened if you didn't answer that one? What about that one? That one?
- *'Will this ever end?'*
 - Will what specifically ever end?
 - Who is responsible for ending it?
 - What are your alternatives?
 - What would happen if it did end?
 - Is that what you really want?

So in that statement of 22 words we have been able to dispute it on at least 23 different levels. How accurate is this statement really?

Distancing

Another tactic is to put some perspective on what you are saying and on the event itself. Here is a list of questions and statements that will help to put things in perspective:

- When you are 107 years old will it matter then?
- If the world was going to end tomorrow would you care about what just happened?
- Is it a fact or just a belief?
- Who else is sympathetic to your situation?
- Who is worse off than you?
- What could happen that would be worse than this event?
- Where would be a worse place to be at this moment?
- What would happen if you did/didn't? How much does that really matter?
- What do you have in your life that this will not effect:
 - Family?
 - Friends?
 - House?
 - Purpose?
 - Hope?
 - Dignity?
 - Self esteem?
 - Your life?
 - Your health?
 - Sense of self?
 - Your belief?
 - Your faith?

Distraction

When you are thinking in a way that is not going to help you feel resilient, interrupt the pattern by saying or doing something totally unpredictable. Try feeling pessimistic while you are tilting your head to one side, poking your tongue out as far as you possibly can, crossing your eyes, waiving your arms and hands about frantically and hopping as high as you can on one leg. If you succeed at doing this and staying pessimistic then you might need professional psychological assistance ... Seriously!

In Part 3 ...

So to summarise part one of this series of articles we could say that knowing the difference between what you can and can't change will help you in all aspects of life. We can not change triggers and we do not have direct control over the results of we generate. What we can control, in most instances, is our attitudes and behaviours.

In *Part 2* we looked at what it is we can do to change the way we think about what has happened. We looked at how to increase our resilience, how to increase our optimism and how to change our attitudes.

In *How to 'do' a good day part 3 – The courage to change your behaviours* we will look at how to increase your behavioural flexibility, how to increase the number of times your responses to situations and people are ideal, how to reduce the number of times you think to yourself 'If only I'd said ...' or 'If only I'd done that ...,' how to reduce the stress and frustration associated with 'I could never do that' and still maintain a strong sense of self.



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