2.2 Optimism – gather unbiased nature

As researchers, we're trained to be critical, to be able to critique ideas, processes, methodologies and so on. It means that we naturally tend to seek out or notice data or evidence that suggests that things need improving. We want to solve problems, and we want to make things better.

That's great if we are trying to improve a task or a process or a research paper or data collection. But it isn't helpful to only notice what's wrong with things when we're thinking about ourselves. Being very negative about ourselves will drain our resilience and get in the way of us being productive. It also strengthens the voice of our inner critic – this is something we will address more fully elsewhere in this online resource.

When we focus on negative interpretations, we start to believe them, and then we begin filtering out or dismissing evidence that contradicts our beliefs. In a similar way, we often believe that the buses are always late (when in fact they are almost always on time), but we filter out or dismiss data showing buses arrive on time in order to reinforce our assertion. We wouldn't do this with our research data, and we shouldn't do it with ourselves.

Pessimistic beliefs prevent us from being positive and for looking for solutions and alternatives to our challenges, as well as having a generally detrimental effect on our wellbeing.

We all tend to naturally fall somewhere along the spectrum between optimists and pessimists. Just noticing when and where we tend to be pessimistic can help us to break out of the habit of pessimism and start to develop our optimism. We are not aiming to be optimistic all of the time – we do need a healthy dose of pessimism occasionally. We need a healthy balance of the two but leaning towards optimism.

Have a think about where you naturally lie on these three dimensions. Imagine that something has gone wrong, something hasn't worked, you have failed at something, or there's been a setback of some sort. For example, an experiment has failed, an important conversation went badly, or you had some horrid reviewers comments.

Those of us who have a tendency to be pessimistic when we're thinking about how long the setbacks last will find ourselves thinking things like, "this always happens to me" or "this will just keep happening". We believe that the problem or the effects are permanent.

On the other hand, those of us with a tendency towards optimism will be thinking "this is just temporary", "it's just one example or a one-off...it doesn't always happen".

In terms of how widespread the setback is, a pessimist might find themselves thinking something like "this affects everything", "the whole project has been affected", "my whole life is affected". This is pervasive. Whilst an optimist will be thinking, "this doesn't affect everything or every situation", "there are still lots of things going well". This is an isolated setback.

Finally, a pessimist may also think or believe that there is not much that they can do to make a difference to the outcome. "I'm powerless", "it's not my fault", "I can't change..or they won't change".   An optimist will believe that with some effort, things can get better., they will believe that there are some options for moving on or rescuing the situation.

Notice what your natural tendency is here. It might depend on this situation, but from now on, try to spot and notice when you have these thoughts. If you catch yourself having pessimistic thoughts, see if you can pause, and try to reframe them. What evidence can you see or find that supports the optimistic belief or perspective.

Once you start looking, there will often be objective truths that support an optimistic belief that our inner pessimist (often known as our inner critic) wants us to ignore.

For example….

Have a look at this cartoon. Maybe you identify with this character. Many of us do something similar to this when we have a belief that we hold about ourselves (for example, that we are not good enough).

So, our inner critic encourages us to filter out all of the evidence and the information that contradicts that belief, and instead, we focus on the minority of data that reinforces our belief, and that's what we remember.

One tool or trick is to imagine that your inner critic, or inner pessimist, had to convince an impartial expert review panel that they were correct.

Imagine that the character from the cartoon on the previous slide had to convince a peer review panel to accept a paper which supports the hypothesis that he is a jerk. Under scrutiny, when the panel looked at the data, they would see that only 1 out of 12 of his observations supported the hypothesis and would reject his paper outright.

Despite how smart we are, we still manage to convince ourselves to accept the minority data as the truth.

Make a note of some of the beliefs you hold about yourself, or about a particularly challenging situation that you are in. For every negative belief, then write down at least two positive beliefs that could be equally true or write down the facts that are 100% true.
This can help to develop your inner optimist and redress the balance. We look at this technique in more detail in the presentation on taming the inner critic with data.

The key to training up your inner optimist, and to defeat your inner critic is to gather balanced data. Sometimes we can't catch ourselves in the moment of having pessimistic thoughts, so another tool is to systematically gather optimistic data on a daily basis. Actively undertaking optimism practice can train up our inner optimist and has a known effect on enhancing optimism. In turn, this boosts our resilience and wellbeing and can just take a few minutes a day.

Here are some data you can gather every day.

Make a note of 3 wins that you have had – these can be anything from a major win to something fairly trivial Examples could be completing a writing goal, catching a bus on time, fixing a bug in code you're writing, getting some great feedback, or persuading someone to help you out with something. This will help you to gather data on what is going well.

The next thing to note down is two strengths or skills that you have used that day. It could be the strengths of skills that enabled your wins, but they could be something else entirely, but gathering these examples helps you to build up evidence of where you are having an impact, developing yourself and having control over a situation.

The final piece of data to gather is a positive feeling or emotion that you have experienced. Excitement, calm, control, anticipation, trust, anything that helps you to acknowledge that during the day you felt positive when our inner pessimist wants us to believe that the whole day wasn't so good.

It is all too easy to dismiss all this evidence and believe that we have not had a good day. Put a reminder on your phone or in your diary to stop once a day and make a note of these things.

Better still, enlist a friend to share your 3-2-1 observations with and get them to reciprocate every day.

It may well feel strange or uncomfortable to start with, as it is something new you are learning to do, but after a few days or weeks, you really start to notice that you feel more positive.