

Balance your Attributions

Think about something positive that has happened to you in the past month. It could be a major thing or something minor. What is it?

Why did that happen? Write a brief explanation below.

Now think about something bad that happened to you in the past month. What is it?

And, briefly, why did that happen?

Depressed people, and those vulnerable to depression, tend to show a certain pattern of these attributions for events. When they pass an exam, make a friend, get a compliment, or are offered a job, they tend to attribute these positive events to the situation, or to luck. The exam was too easy, the friend would like anyone, the compliment was offered out of politeness, and the job was given to whoever applied first. It never has to do with them. It wasn't that they were intelligent, or likable, or deserving. It's something external.

When something bad happens, on the other hand, it's all about them and has nothing to do with the situation. She failed the exam because she's stupid. He lost the friend because he's inadequate. She was given the insult because she deserved it. He didn't get the job because he gave a terrible interview. The bad things get attributed to something internal, and usually something quite general (*"I'm inadequate"* rather than *"I wasn't nice to her that day"*).

The result is an imbalance: never giving yourself credit for the good things that happen, but taking all the blame for the bad things. This bias is destructive to self-esteem and promotes a negative view of yourself and your world, leading to a sense of helplessness. It is at the core of a major theory of depression called the “learned helplessness” theory, developed by Martin Seligman.

Go back to your explanations for the positive and negative events above. Write “internal” beside the explanation if you attributed the event to your own actions or abilities. Write “external” beside it if you attributed the event to something about the situation, or to luck.

If you suspect that you often blame yourself for negatives and fail to give yourself credit for positives, consider writing out your explanations for at least three negative and three positive situations, then classify them as internal or external. Perhaps your mood influences your pattern. When you feel well, do you take some of the credit for positives and blame yourself less for negatives? What about when you are particularly depressed?

Go back to the positive event you identified. If you attributed it to something external, can you think of anything about you that might have had an impact? For example, if a friend invited you out to dinner, perhaps this suggests that you are likeable!

Now take a look at the negative event. If you attributed it entirely to yourself, can you think of anything else that contributed? For example, if you got in a traffic accident, might the other driver have been at least partially responsible? What about the weather, or the brakes on your car?

This is not an attempt to deny all responsibility for the negative events that happen to us. Sometimes we really are at fault, just as positive events sometimes happen that have little to do with our own efforts. If you ignore your own role in negative events you lose the chance to learn from them. For example, if you wind up in debt from overusing your credit card, it is useful to recognize your own role in this so that it doesn’t happen repeatedly.

We are trying to achieve a balance, so that negatives don't immediately and automatically lead to self-blame and credit is at least sometimes taken for positives.

If you seem to have a depressing pattern when making attributions for events, try to recognize good and bad events as they occur.

Watch as you come up with an automatic explanation for an event. Classify it as internal or external (something about you or something about the situation). If it shows the unbalanced depressive pattern, come up with an alternative attribution.

- If the event was positive, try to think of something you did that might have contributed to the success.
- If the event was something negative, think of something outside yourself that might be partly responsible.