

Explanatory Style: How Your Mind Frames Your Reality

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Explanatory style is a psychological attribute that indicates how people explain to themselves why they experience a particular event, either positive or negative. Psychologists have identified three components in explanatory style:

Personal. This involves how one explains where the cause of an event arises. People experiencing events may see themselves as the cause; that is, they have internalised the cause for the event. Example: "I always forget to make that turn" (internal) as opposed to "That turn can sure sneak up on you" (external).

Permanent. This involves how one explains the extent of the cause. People may see the situation as unchangeable, e.g., "I always lose my keys" or "I never forget a face".

Pervasive. This involves how one explains the extent of the effects. People may see the situation as affecting all aspects of life, e.g., "I can't do anything right" or "Everything I touch seems to turn to gold".

People who generally tend to blame themselves for negative events, believe that such events will continue indefinitely, and let such events affect many aspects of their lives display what is called a pessimistic explanatory style. Conversely, people who generally tend to blame others for negative events, believe that such events will end soon, and do not let such events affect too many aspects of their lives display what is called an optimistic explanatory style.

Some research has linked a pessimistic explanatory style to depression and physical illness. The concept of explanatory style encompasses a wide range of possible responses to both positive and negative occurrences, rather than a black-white difference between optimism and pessimism. Also, an individual does not necessarily show a uniform explanatory style in all aspects of life, but may exhibit varying responses to different types of events.