

Guide 4

Explanatory style—thinking habits that affect our resilience



Our research has demonstrated that the number-one roadblock to resilience is not genetics, not childhood experiences, not a lack of opportunity or wealth. The principal obstacle to tapping into our inner strength lies with our explanatory [thinking] style.¹⁶

What is “explanatory style”?

Researchers have found that how people explain their successes and failures influences whether they persevere or give up when faced with adversity.²⁶

Dr. Martin Seligman, a social psychologist, and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania have studied the development of resilience for more than thirty years. Most notable is their research into people’s beliefs about personal adversity, challenge, and success. Seligman listened to thousands of people explain the reasons for things that happened to them, and concluded that people develop *thinking habits*, preferred ways of viewing the world. Seligman terms these habits a person’s “explanatory style” or “thinking style.” He suggests that our thinking styles can help or hinder our ability to respond resiliently to inevitable bumps in the road.¹⁸

How does our explanatory style affect our resilience?

Our explanatory style comes into play as we try to determine *why* things happen and *what impact* they will have. Our style can “bias and color our viewpoint, leading us to develop patterns of behavior that are often self-defeating.”¹⁶

Our explanatory style may be the same at home, at work, and on the social scene, or it may vary according to our roles in these environments. The important thing about explanatory style is that it causes us to react *out of habit* and jump to conclusions that may not be accurate. This, in turn, prevents us from using the kind of flexible thinking that promotes problem solving and positive change.

Seligman’s research shows that people unconsciously look for answers to three questions when trying to make sense of what happened to them. These questions relate to what Seligman calls the three

dimensions of explanatory style: personalization, permanence, and pervasiveness.^{16,18}

■ Personalization:

Who caused the problem?
Me/Not me

■ Permanence:

How long will this problem last?
Always/Not always

■ Pervasiveness:

How much of my life does this problem affect?
Everything/Not everything

Thinking habits associated with depression

Think back to Guide 3. Remember Mary-Jo’s beliefs about why she wasn’t invited to the party? Let’s look at her responses again to help us understand the concept of explanatory style:

Mary-Jo has been consciously living a healthy lifestyle for more than two months. She finds out that she wasn’t invited to a party at school, but her friend Janice was invited.

Mary-Jo’s explanation for this adversity was:

Janice always get invited to things; I never do. I am such a loser—nobody likes me. She gets very sad, doesn’t go out jogging, and eats a whole box of candy instead.

This explanation is typical of “Me/Always/Everything” thinking—an explanatory pattern related to “pessimistic” thinking. Researchers say that this kind of thinking can lead to a loss of hope and to depression among people who habitually use it in response to adversity.

With the “Me” statement “*I am such a loser*,” Mary-Jo shows that she takes the situation personally and blames herself for not being invited to the party. The statement is also an example of “Always” and “Everything” thinking: If Mary-Jo is innately a loser,



many aspects of her life will be affected, and there is little hope for change. She believes that she never gets invitations because no one likes her.

People who habitually take things personally often believe that negative situations are permanent. This belief affects many areas of their lives, or is pervasive. Understandably, they tend to give up more easily because things seem so overwhelming. It is hard to respond resiliently to daily stresses with “Me/Always/Everything” habits of thinking.

Thinking habits associated with aggression

“Not me/Always/Everything” thinking can also restrict resilient responses to adversity. People with “Not me” thinking have a habit of blaming others or taking little responsibility for adversity. If “Not me” thinking is paired with “Always” and “Everything” thinking, people typically view situations as permanent and affecting many aspects of their lives. They experience a sense of futility when things go wrong. But instead of leading to depression, this thinking style can make people feel trapped and angry, or cause them to lash out at others. An extreme version of this pattern is sometimes seen in people who act out or engage in delinquent behaviour.²¹

We’ll use the same example of the party to illustrate how a “Not me/Always/Everything” thinking style might look. Here’s how another person, Katina, might explain why she wasn’t invited to a party to which her friend was invited:

Janice always gets invited to things; I never do. When Janice and her friend Nancy get together, they are such snobs. Katina becomes angry, phones Nancy, and tells her off. Then, she calls for a pizza, gets into an argument with the person on the phone, and ends up cancelling the order. Katina’s frustration mounts, she skips her regular jog, and she goes to bed without eating.



Katina gets angry because she blames the situation on Nancy and Janice. Since she is using “Always” and “Everything” thinking, she believes the situation is futile. Her anger spills into other areas of her life—she yells at the pizza delivery operator. And instead of exercising, she skips dinner and goes to bed.

Thinking habits associated with optimism

Another explanatory habit is important to note here: “Not me/Not always/Not everything” thinking. To see this style in action, let’s take another look at Anna’s explanation for not being invited to the party.

That’s disappointing, but I actually don’t know Nancy very well. Janice knows her far better. That’s probably why I wasn’t invited. Maybe next time I’ll be invited. She goes for a run, stops at a video store to rent a new comedy, and calls a girlfriend to come and watch it.

Anna believes that Nancy didn’t invite her to the party because they don’t know each other that well yet, a “Not me” explanation. She sees the situation as temporary, or “Not always,” thinking that she might be included in a future social event when she and Nancy know each other better. Anna’s “Not everything” belief about this adversity shows that other aspects of her life are not affected. She continues with her healthy lifestyle activities and her relationships with other people.



The key to resilient thinking habits—accurate and flexible thinking

While a “Not me/Not always/Not everything” style may be the most “optimistic” explanatory style, it may not be an accurate or realistic view of a situation. People who use this style in all situations run the risk of losing out on genuine relationships, since their cheerful outlook might ignore difficult issues that exist between themselves and others. In addition, they may be doing themselves a disservice during other times of serious adversity, such as when they are experiencing acute health problems, if their habit of seeing situations positively prevents them from seeking help.

The goal is to maintain a sense of *realistic optimism* by thinking as accurately and flexibly as possible about each situation we face. In the next guide, we discuss several common thinking traps that contribute to our explanatory style and restrict our resilience.

WHAT’S YOUR EXPLANATORY (THINKING) STYLE?

Reflect on these questions:

- In times of stress, do I often blame myself when things go wrong? (“Me” thinking)
- Do I often blame someone else or the circumstances? (“Not me” thinking)
- Do I often feel as if problems will be permanent and all encompassing? (“Always/Everything” thinking)
- Do I typically look for aspects of problems that are temporary and specific? (“Not always/Not everything” thinking)

Refer to Section 2, Helping Children Become More Resilient, for suggestions and activities concerning children’s emerging explanatory styles.

Please visit www.reachinginreachingout.com, RIRO’s website, to view a brief video on explanatory style (Skills Video 3).

What do teachers say about increasing awareness of their explanatory styles?

I used to habitually have a “Me” response to situations at work, and put in long hours taking responsibility for things that I didn’t need to. After the training, I find myself delegating more, and this has encouraged more of a team effort amongst the staff. –LD (supervisor)

Before understanding explanatory style, if something went wrong first thing in the morning, I would immediately think to myself, “Oh no! This is going to be a hard day.” Now I don’t use such permanent thinking. I just take the day as it comes and see what happens. –BM (preschool)

Summary of Guide 4

Explanatory style—thinking habits that affect our resilience



What is explanatory style?

Research shows that how people *explain* their successes and failures influences whether they persevere or give up when faced with adversity.

Social psychologist and researcher Dr. Martin Seligman says that people develop *habits of explanation* that become preferred ways of viewing the world. He calls these thinking habits our “*explanatory styles*.” These habits can help or hinder our ability to respond resiliently to adversity.

How does our explanatory style affect our resilience?

Explanatory style thinking habits are

- explanations we develop for *why* things happen and *what impact* they will have
- *not necessarily* accurate assessments of the stressful situation

Seligman’s research shows that people unconsciously look at the three dimensions of explanatory style—personalization, permanence, and pervasiveness—when trying to make meaning of the things that happen to them.

- **Personalization:** Who caused the problem?
Me/Not me
- **Permanence:** How long will this problem last?
Always/Not always
- **Pervasiveness:** How much of my life does this problem affect?
Everything/Not everything

Our explanatory style is a mix of these three dimensions. Each style is associated with a typical response to stress. Here are a few examples of explanatory styles:

- “Me/Always/Everything” = helplessness, giving up, depression
- “Not me/Always/Everything” = lack of responsibility, anger, acting out, hopelessness
- “Not me/Not always/Not everything” = more optimistic behaviour, but can be inaccurate

To increase our resilience, we need to challenge our explanatory styles on each dimension by thinking accurately and flexibly about each situation we face.

Challenging explanatory style → Increased resilience