

REALITY BITES

If you consider yourself a natural optimist, we're afraid to inform you that you're cheerfully deluded. The fact is we're all born pessimists, and have evolved with a negativity bias that was once crucial to our survival by keeping us on high alert to danger.

Even though it no longer serves us from a life or death perspective, pessimism is a natural part of being human. And while we can't change that, we can train the conscious brain to look for the good and develop the ability to see things in context.

"Every single person in the world has a negativity bias; your subconscious brain is always looking for the negative," says Scholes. "When we play sport or work out, we'll remember the things that didn't work - the shots we missed or that we couldn't do the last set in the gym. But we forget that we just did 10 sets in the gym, or we just made 10 shots. We remember the bad stuff well and we don't remember the good stuff so well."

In spite of this Stone Age carryover, your overall perspective is shaped by your explanatory style - the way you explain failure in your head. You have a 50-50 chance of having either an optimistic or pessimistic explanatory style, by virtue of your upbringing.

"It's a skill learned in the first six years [of life]," explains Scholes. "Fifty per cent of us will take a moment in time, define ourselves by it, think it's going to happen to us all the time and that it affects other areas of our life in a negative way."

"If I have a pessimistic explanatory style, when I miss a basketball shot, I'll say 'I'm a loser. I'm the sort of person who misses winning shots. I think it's going to happen again and I'll also think it'll affect other areas of my life. So, that's why my girlfriend dropped me."

"One of the reasons people stop going [to the gym] is because they miss one session. They think 'I'm going to go four times a week, then they might get sick, miss a couple of sessions and it all falls apart and they stop going regularly. That's your negativity bias talking because you're noticing the few sessions you missed, not the 24 sessions you've been to in the last three months."

But a person with an optimistic explanatory style will realise that when something goes wrong, it doesn't define them. Missing a session in the gym does

not influence their long-term health goals, or an "off" day does not represent stalled progress. Past challenges and results do not negatively affect their future performance.

"They shift their thinking so that one thing going wrong doesn't mean this will always go wrong, or that other things will also go wrong for them," says Scholes.

"The average person in the gym often thinks they should be improving every week and should be stronger every session. If you're always looking for improvement, and you don't get it, it can sometimes become a catastrophe. Not every session is going to be great [but] that's okay because overall, you'll still improve."

Scholes says that training to identify the good things not only gives you a more balanced view of life; it has flow-on effects: "The data shows that people who have an optimistic explanatory style live longer, are less likely to get sick (and if they do get sick, they're more likely to get over it if it's a serious illness), they earn more money, and have higher GPA (grade point average) scores."

CHANGE YOUR MIND

Before you assume your pessimism is just another thing to be ticked off about, rest assured that the marvels of neuroplasticity are here to save the day. Even as an adult you can relearn your explanatory style by forming new brain pathways that challenge your negative tendencies.

"You can get new wiring in your brain really quickly. It only takes 24 hours to get semi-permanent wiring forming," says Scholes. "You can [also] unlearn it quite quickly, but the more you do it, the more permanent that wiring is."

People who emphasise their strengths rather than focusing on weaknesses tend to be more accepting of, and less emotionally attached to, a single event. They are able to move on from "failure" and focus on their next goal.

Perhaps most importantly, learning to think more positively builds reserves of resilience and optimism that serve you when you need them most.

"It helps protect you when things go badly, because you know how to cope if you create the wiring for that," says Scholes.

COACH AND CAPTAIN

Elite athletes understand that the volume of work they do over a long period of time forms the basis for achieving goals.

If they are unwell or rundown, they reduce their training load and accept there will be times when performances stagnate.

"It is sometimes better to miss a small amount of short-term training to avoid having to miss longer-term due to injury," explains Scholes. "When I work with coaches and athletes, we look at what has gone right, and trust that the base work put in during periods where improvement is happening will pay off later on."

In team situations, Scholes teaches coaches to apply feedback that highlights strategies that worked well, emphasising solutions-based tactics for dealing with negatives. Adopting this mindset can help you bounce back from setbacks and focus positively on new goals, too.

Add these approaches to your gym inventory:

Know your end goal: Is your long-term goal wellbeing, weight loss or increased muscle? Review your training sessions with this long-term goal in mind. Remember the bigger picture: "People eat a cake and think 'that's it. I've blown the diet' even though they've been great for six months," reminds Scholes.

Be flexible: If you have limited time, adjust your session and be proud of yourself for getting some training in rather than being disappointed for doing less.

"If you can't get to the gym because you've got to take the kids to school, don't stress about that and make it a bigger issue than it is. Go for a walk that day instead," says Scholes.

Contextualise: Focus on what's happened over the past six months rather than missing a session one particular week. Says Scholes: "Look at how well you've done and where you are compared with two years ago. Consider how much higher your aspirations are, which indicates you've improved a lot."

Focus on enjoyment: Training should be hard but enjoyable. Keep a journal reminding yourself of the good things. Once a week, write down the five best things you achieved from your training program. 4

Learn more about mastering a positive mindset at positivesportscaching.com.au.