



# OPTIMISM: HEALTHY CHARACTER TRAIT AND PROTECTIVE FACTOR



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## ABSTRACT

Limited scientific publications on optimism and hope, as well as their expression and correlates in Venezuelan samples, justified their approach in studies linked to the research line called Psychological Well-being and its relationship with emotional bonds, emotional intelligence, motivation towards forgiveness, optimistic attributional style and hope in adolescents and adults by Professor Pura Zavarce Armas (Universidad Metropolitana de Caracas). This chapter aims to clarify the conceptualization from the cognitive-behavioral perspective and the model of lasting well-being proposed by positive psychology, highlighting the relevant correlates that confirm its influence on psychopathological and mental health variables. Likewise, it presents the findings on its manifestation in Venezuelan adults from two quantitative, non-experimental and transactional-descriptive research studies. The results first show a predominance of pessimistic attributional style, especially in young people, where personalization has the greatest contribution, with self-esteem being identified as an area of concern. Second, there is a high level of hope due to the non-permanent and per-



sistent nature of the causes of negative events, which is related to the perception of personal control space in the face of adverse circumstances. It confirms that optimism and hope positively influence positive affect and psychological well-being, making them protective and preventive factors for mental health, especially during changes or challenging situations.

**Keywords:** attributional style, optimism, hope, psychological well-being, anxiety and depression.





## RESUMEN

Limitadas publicaciones científicas sobre el optimismo y la esperanza, así como su expresión y correlatos en muestras venezolanas, justificó su abordaje en estudios vinculados a la línea de investigación denominada Bienestar psicológico y su relación con vínculos afectivos, inteligencia emocional, motivación hacia el perdón, estilo atribucional optimista y esperanza, en adolescentes y adultos, de la Profa. Pura Zavarce Armas (Universidad Metropolitana de Caracas). El propósito del capítulo se orienta hacia precisar la conceptualización desde la perspectiva cognitiva-conductual y el modelo de bienestar duradero propuesto por la psicología positiva, resaltar los correlatos relevantes que confirman su influencia en variables psicopatológicas y de salud mental. Así mismo, presentar los hallazgos sobre su manifestación en adultos venezolanos aportados por dos investigaciones de enfoque cuantitativo, diseño no experimental y transaccional-descriptivo. Los resultados muestran primero un predominio del estilo atribucional pesimista, especialmente en jóvenes, donde la personalización tiene la mayor aportación, identificándose a la autoestima como un área de



atención. Segundo, se evidencia alta esperanza, por el carácter no permanente y persistente de las causas de los eventos negativos, lo cual se relaciona con percepción de espacio de control personal ante las circunstancias adversas. Se confirma que el optimismo y la esperanza influyen positivamente sobre el afecto positivo y el bienestar psicológico, convirtiéndolos en factores de protección y prevención de la salud mental, especialmente en tránsitos o situaciones adversas.

**Palabras clave:** estilo atribucional, optimismo, esperanza, bienestar psicológico, ansiedad y depresión.



# INTRODUCTION

From the epistemological bases of psychoneuroimmunology, the contributions of neurosciences and epigenetics in the construction of a new perspective of health, on the one hand, show that neuroplasticity becomes evident by confirming that brain cells can regenerate and regions of the brain destined to one function can be used to carry out different functions, which shows the enormous potential for change and evolution throughout the life cycle. On the other hand, advances highlight the limits of genetics (with its associated determinism) and extend into epigenetic considerations that reveal the idea of control over genetics.

The space opened up by this biological perspective emphasizes the importance of personal choices, the level of consciousness, the lifestyle cultivated, the emotional experience managed, the quality of thoughts created and the coping strategies implemented in the face of problems and difficulties. All this influences the activation of the genetic regulatory mechanisms associated with health or disease, and the changes are transmitted to future generations.

The decision to activate or deactivate the environmental factors that contribute to building health and avoiding or reducing disease risk factors can be managed through conscious healthy practices. Cultivating optimism emerges as a beneficial practice for developing qualities that foster good character, based on a cognitive activity that enables the formation of future-oriented thoughts conducive to a positive, healthy emotional experience and attitudes toward life that make it worth living.



# CONCEPTUALIZATION OF OPTIMISM AND ITS IMPORTANCE

Experiences and how people perceive them affect feelings and behaviors. Understanding the process requires addressing the interpretation of events, mediated by the belief system, the bond with the people involved, areas of life that are compromised, values, etc. Whether consciously or not, meanings are built from childhood and nurtured throughout life.

Emotions indicate the quality of thoughts and the narrative they constitute. If you feel anxiety, fear or panic, it is evident that the thoughts are related to events that have not happened, but negatively compromise the emotional experience in the present.

Positive emotions associated with the future include experiences of satisfaction, confidence and faith, feeling confident, optimism and hope. The resulting positivity creates a more favorable mood to overcome sadness, improve resistance to depression, achieve better work performance and enhance health (Seligman, 2005). It paves the way for positive emotions to flow into experiences, thereby fostering positivity that creates a conducive space for making and implementing future plans (Fredrickson, 2009).

Thoughts about the future may result in either an optimistic or pessimistic outlook. An optimistic disposition does not mean creating a false sense of reality and the future by ignoring the negative aspects of experiences and conditions in order to believe that everything is fine when in fact it is not. On the contrary, studies predict that people who tend to adopt an optimistic perspective develop an equally optimistic attitude towards their own lives, which in turn predicts greater success in their endeavors (Seligman, 2006).

For positive psychology, a model that emphasizes the study of the processes underlying lasting well-being, character strengths represent traits with moral value whose conscious practice facilitates the cultivation of positivity and the management of a meaningful life. Moderately experienced positive traits nurture the notion of good character and virtuosity. Optimism, along with hope, implies believing in a better future, in working to achieve it and having a space of control over it.



As character traits, they cultivate the virtue of transcendence, which includes emotional strengths that go beyond the person to build higher and permanent connections with others, the meaning of life, the divine and the universe (Peterson & Park, 2009).

The study of optimism from a cognitive-behavioral perspective defines it as a dispositional personality trait that mediates between external events and personal interpretation of them and implies the tendency to expect a favorable future (Seligman, 2006). Therefore, it is related to the attitude towards circumstances, which has direct consequences on mood, behavior and the behavioral outcomes (Avia and Vázquez, 2011; Seligman, 2006; Seligman, 2011).

Research confirms that this positive quality, activated through coping strategies and an adequate level of emotional stability, facilitates actions aimed at preserving and managing health (Martorelli and Mustaca, as cited in Calvanese et al., 2010). Similarly, Calvanese et al. (2010), point out that its relationship with health is studied from a cognitive-behavioral and psychophysiological perspective, being considered as a mediating variable that promotes healthy behaviors. This, in turn, has positive effects on the course of an illness by increasing survival in terminal illnesses and facilitating a better perception of well-being and overall health. For example, Ridder et al. (2000), indicate that among patients with multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's disease, there is a relationship between optimism and better adaptation to the disease and the necessary medical measures for treatment.

Londoño (2009) reports that he found a positive relationship between dispositional optimism and success in the university career in a group of Colombian students aged 17 to 26, observing a lower number of students withdrawing from or postponing courses. In another study, Kamenetzky et al. (2009) in Argentina found that personal characteristics such as low anxiety and an external attributional style that tends to optimism lead to a reduction or elimination of the aversive state of frustration.

From a relational framework, evidence shows that pessimistic people tend to have a passive attitude toward difficulties and challenges, which reduces their willingness to seek out connections with others in order to request support (Ferreira & Sherman, 2006; Seligman, 2006). This experience may limit the resources and hinder the development of healthy relationships aimed at fulfilling security and support needs during adverse situations, which is crucial for health and lasting well-being (Berscheid, 2007).

# OPTIMISTIC AND PESSIMISTIC EXPLANATORY STYLE. CORRELATES WITH PSYCHOPATHOLOGY AND MENTAL HEALTH

In optimism, studied through the attributional reformulation of learned helplessness theory (Abramson et al., 1978), the causes that people attribute to positive and negative events are explored. This cognitive process establishes attributional dimensions that lead to either an optimistic or pessimistic explanatory style (Carr, 2007; Seligman, 2006).

Sanjuán and Magallares (2006) add that attribution could be understood as the cognitive process through which people provide explanations for the situations they experience. Depending on the reasons inferred, different emotions will be experienced.

On the other hand, Seligman (2006) emphasizes that the explanatory style is more than just words spoken when things go well or poorly; it is a way of thinking that is learned in childhood and adolescence. This style derives from one's own beliefs about their place in the world, personal worth, feelings of deservedness and contribution, as well as their capacity for hope. These conceptions define whether one is optimistic or pessimistic and are a result of the interpretative pattern associated with three dimensions that shape the explanatory style. These dimensions are personalization, permanence and pervasiveness.

Personalization refers to the degree to which a situation is explained by internal or external causes (internality – externality), meaning the personal responsibility attributed to the event. In this sense, optimists tend to externalize the causes of adversities that happen to them and internalize the causes of their achievements. Conversely, pessimists internalize the causes of negative events and externalizes the causes of successes, attributing them to chance or luck.

Permanence refers to the time that the causes of the event last or are maintained (stability – instability). In this case, optimists attribute stability to situations they view as positive and perceive adverse situations as temporary. Conversely, pessimists believe that the causes and consequences of adverse events tend to remain over time, while those associated with positive events are unstable or fleeting.

Finally, pervasiveness considers the extent to which causes affect various areas of life or are limited to the specific situation (globality – specificity). In this case, optimists perceive positive events as having the potential to impact multiple areas of their lives, while negative events are seen as having a specific impact on the situation or circumstance without necessarily affecting other areas. On the contrary, pessimists believe that negative events and their causes will impact multiple or all areas of their lives, while the causes of positive events may have a minimal impact and are limited to the specific context in which they occurred.

These interpretive views construct an attributional style that organizes the way life and its events will be interpreted, taking the form of an Optimistic Explanatory Style (OES) and a Pessimistic Explanatory Style (PES).

### **The Optimistic Explanatory Style (OES) tends to consider:**

- The causes of negative events as external to the person, temporary and affecting a specific area of life.
- The causes of positive events as internal to the person (referring to personal qualities or characteristics), permanent over time and affecting other areas of life, meaning they are global.

### **In contrast, the Pessimistic Explanatory Style (PES) features the opposite characteristics:**

- The causes of negative events are attributed to personal characteristics (internal), have a permanent nature over time and have a broad impact (global impact).
- The causes of positive events are attributed to external factors (external), are temporary, and their impact is specific.

According to Seligman (2006), one can have an optimistic perception in one dimension and a pessimistic perception in another.

From the attributional model, how is hope constructed? Having or lacking hope will be a consequence of the dimensions of permanence and pervasiveness, considering only the attribution to the causes of negative events. Therefore, these dimensions focus on valuing the temporary and specific nature of the causes. This helps to limit feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, thereby fostering hope, especially during transitions through adverse or negative situations. When negative events and their causes are perceived as permanent and global, it fuels hopelessness and the impression that nothing one does will affect what happens in their life (Seligman, 2006).

Sanjuán et al. (2013) present a review of studies reporting the effects of optimistic (positive) and pessimistic (negative) attributional styles. They point out that according to Abramson et al.'s (1978) theory of hopelessness, with regard to negative events, the dimension of personalization (internality) predicts declines in self-esteem and is less important than the dimensions of permanence (stability) and pervasiveness (globality) in predicting depression. Similarly, with respect to cross-sectional studies, most show an association between the Pessimistic Explanatory Style (PES) and the development of depressive symptoms. However, in other studies, some of which are longitudinal and also analyze PES in relation to adverse events, results report that PES predicts clinical depression, anxiety symptoms and disorders, hostility, personality disorders and schizophrenia.

Other research also explains the relationship between optimistic/pessimistic attributional style, depressive symptoms, and well-being. In a 14-week prospective study with young adults, Southall & Roberts (2002) found that participants who were asymptomatic at the beginning of the study and had low self-esteem and a negative attributional style exhibited an increase in depressive symptoms when exposed to high levels of stress, compared to the rest of the sample.

Sanjuan et al. (2013), with the aim of analyzing the psychometric properties of the Spanish version of the Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ by Peterson et al., 1982) for negative situations, in a sample of 815 people, not only confirmed that the items fit the original three-factor model associated with the three attributional dimensions but also reported results demonstrating a positive correlation between the attributional dimensions and the negative explanatory style, with depression and negative affect, and a negative correlation with positive affect.

Finally, Moreno and Marrero (2015), when examining the relationships between optimism, self-esteem, subjective well-being and psychological well-being in a sample of 1,403 Mexican adults aged 17 to 78 of both genders, found that optimism and self-esteem positively correlated with various indicators of subjective well-being and psychological well-being. Additionally, for both genders, optimism was the main predictor of subjective well-being, while self-esteem was the main predictor of psychological well-being.

Some research with Venezuelan samples provides relevant information about optimism and its correlates. Bencomo et al. (2004) studied 117 nursing staff members at the Hospital Universitario of Maracaibo to examine the relationship between personality traits, psychological adjustment and burnout syndrome. The findings not only indicated an absence of a relationship with a “type personality” but also confirmed a connection with specific traits and psychological adjustment ability. A relevant trait present in non-burned-out individuals was optimism, along with a realistic perspective of events, the ability to establish interpersonal connections and high psychological adjustment.

In another study, Sojo and Guarino (2006) evaluated personal characteristics and psychosocial, demographic, economic and physical and mental health factors among unemployed individuals. They found that optimistic people with high self-esteem and a sense of control exhibited fewer physical and psychological symptoms, concluding that these variables serve as protective factors for health.

Correia and Rodríguez (2014) explored the relationship between family dynamics, economic hardship, self-concept, achievement motivation, gender and psychological well-being in high school students aged 15 to 18. One of the most significant findings was that individuals with higher psychological well-being had lower levels of hopelessness and a tendency toward positive self-evaluation.

Finally, when relating attributional style to depression, Seligman (2005) points out that a pessimistic thinking style can have an adaptive value, being useful in anticipating risks and making decisions. However, if it becomes more pronounced, it may predispose individuals to depressive episodes, lack of initiative and poor health.

# OPTIMISM AND HOPE IN VENEZUELAN ADULTS

The evidence presented is conclusive regarding the importance of optimism as a protective factor for mental health and well-being. The limited scientific publications on its expression and correlates in Venezuelan samples motivated its approach in several research studies that resulted in undergraduate theses for the degree of Psychology at the Universidad Metropolitana de Caracas. The contributions of these studies are presented below. The research studies fall under the research line of Professor Pura Zavarce Armas, called Psychological Well-being and its relationship with emotional bonds, emotional intelligence, motivation towards forgiveness, optimistic attributional style and hope in adolescents and adults.

It aims to deepen the understanding of the psychological processes underlying behavior in each dimension of the development mentioned above in adolescents and adults. Similarly, by approaching the relationships identified between these variables and psychological well-being, the goal is to provide scientific evidence to facilitate the evaluation of explanatory models that adjust to the complexity of the processes in the Venezuelan context, as well as the design of resources aimed at the prevention and promotion of personal and collective well-being.

The empirical contributions of two quantitative research studies on the optimistic/pessimistic attributional style and its relationship with psychopathological and mental health variables are particularly relevant. The following section details the methodology and main results, which will be used to formulate the integrated conclusions in the final part.

The first study aimed to associate optimistic/pessimistic attributional style, attachment styles and various sociodemographic variables with anxiety and psychological well-being in adults aged 20 to 65 from the Metropolitan Area of Caracas (Olivares, 2018). It was a descriptive-correlational field research study with a non-experimental and cross-sectional-descriptive design and a partial explanatory value (Hernández et al., 2008). The study involved a sample of 260 individuals of both genders, aged 20 to 65, and marital status was also considered.

**The instruments used were:**

- Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ) (Peterson et al., 1982), with a linguistic validity version by experts, conducted by Ceballos and López (2018) and Olivares (2018).
- Fraley et al.'s (2000) Close Relationships Scale, validated by Herrera and Lyon (2012).
- State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (IDARE) by Spielberger and Díaz – Guerrero (1975).
- Ryff's (2007) Psychological Wellbeing Scale, validated by Zambrano (2018).

The data were analyzed using Pearson's bilateral correlation statistic to determine relationships, and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used.

The study results report two predictive profiles for anxiety (one for state anxiety and another for trait anxiety), with hope identified as a potential protective factor. Predictive profiles indicate that individuals who are divorced or widowed and feel hopeless are likely to experience higher levels of state anxiety. Conversely, younger individuals with more a pessimistic attributional style, insecure attachment style, female gender, who perceive low levels of hope and have a pessimistic attributional style in positive situations, are more likely to exhibit higher levels of trait anxiety.

Regarding psychological well-being, five predictive profiles were found, highlighting that an optimistic attributional style and a healthy (secure) attachment style are significantly associated with greater perceived psychological well-being, especially in the dimensions of positive relationships, achievements, self-acceptance and confidence. In the dimension of positive relations, individuals with a more optimistic attributional style and a secure attachment style tend to report higher levels of satisfaction. For the achievements dimension, older individuals with a more optimistic attributional style in positive situations and a secure attachment style will experience higher levels of well-being. With regard to the dimension of personal growth and purpose in life, age is the sole contributing factor, indicating that younger individuals are more likely to value greater satisfaction. In the self-acceptance and confidence dimension, only individuals with an optimistic attributional style report greater satisfaction. Finally,

for the competence dimension, no sufficient correlation was found to suggest a predictive profile. Overall, an optimistic attributional style and a secure attachment style are the best predictors of higher levels of total psychological well-being.

The second study aimed to identify the effect of emotional intelligence as a mediator in the relationship between the optimistic/pessimistic attributional style and its impact on psychological well-being and depression among young adults in the Metropolitan Area of Caracas (Ceballos and López, 2018). This was a correlational and explanatory research with a non-experimental, cross-sectional design and an explanatory scope. The sample consisted of 243 individuals of both genders, aged 18 to 30. Marital status and socioeconomic status were also considered using the Grafar-Méndez method (Méndez y Méndez, 1994). The instruments used were:

- Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ) (Peterson et al., 1982), with a linguistic validity version by experts, conducted by Ceballos and López (2018) and Olivares (2018). Ryff's (2007) Psychological Well-being Scale, validated by Zambrano (2018). TMMS-24 Scale (Fernández-Berrocal et al., 2004).
- Beck's Depression Inventory (BDI-II) (1996), in its Spanish adaptation (Sanz et al., 2003). The path analysis was used to explain the relationship of endogenous variables with an exogenous variable and a mediator, using AMOS 22 from the PAWS Statistics software package. This technique was chosen under the assumption that the study variables are quantitative and, according to the diagram by Pedret et al. (2000), is the appropriate analysis to observe the effect and magnitude of the optimistic/pessimistic attributional style and emotional intelligence on psychological well-being and depression, and to determine the existence or absence of a moderating effect of emotional intelligence.

The most significant results of the study indicate that among the young adults in the sample, there was a predominance of a pessimistic attributional style. Specifically, the dimension of personalization leaned towards pessimism for both positive and negative events, contributing more heavily to the development of a pessimistic attributional style. In contrast, the dimensions of permanence and pervasiveness showed a more optimistic trend, especially in relation to negative events. Consequently, hope was high, and emotional intelligence was average across the three factors that constitute it (attention, clarity and repair). As for psychological well-being, scores were within the normal range across its five dimensions (positive relations,



achievements, personal growth and purpose in life, self-acceptance and confidence and competence), and lastly, levels of depression were low.

On the other hand, only two significant relationships were associated with sociodemographic variables with optimistic/pessimistic attributional style and psychological well-being, thus demonstrating that socioeconomic status I (upper class) reflects higher levels of psychological well-being and an optimistic attributional style compared to the other status (II, III and IV).

With respect to emotional intelligence, it does not moderate the impact of the variables but rather predicts them. Therefore, it is considered an exogenous variable with a direct relationship with the optimistic/pessimistic attributional style and psychological well-being. It is emphasized that depression is entirely excluded from this relationship since the relationship is not significant due to the low levels of depression.

When observing the path analysis, the attention factor (perception) has a negative impact on the dimension of achievements in psychological well-being, indicating that greater attention is associated with a lower valuation of well-being in this dimension. The clarity factor (understanding) positively predicts all dimensions of psychological well-being and the attributional style, meaning that greater emotional understanding enhances the appreciation of well-being and tends to make the attributional style more optimistic. Regarding the repair factor (regulation), it has a positive impact on four of the five dimensions of psychological well-being (positive relations, achievements, personal growth and purpose in life and self-acceptance and confidence) and negatively predicts the attributional style, meaning that greater emotional regulation is associated with a more pessimistic attributional style.



# CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions drawn from both studies indicate a prevalence of the pessimistic attributional style, especially among young adults, with the dimension of personalization contributing most to the pessimistic trend. This implies that positive events are attributed to external factors, with a temporary duration and a specific impact, whereas negative events are attributed to internal characteristics of individuals, considered permanent over time and having a global impact.

Personalization refers to the personal space of responsibility attributed to causes. Given the pessimistic trend, the constructed perspective places greater responsibility on personal characteristics associated with limitations and flaws, while attributing positive outcomes to others or chance. Thus, it can be a familiar experience to have high expectations for one's own responsibilities that seem unattainable, limitations in recognizing one's influence on positive events, fostering devaluation and low self-esteem, feeling unloved by others and failing to appreciate talents that nurture healthy notions of self-efficacy. The consequent personal effect can negatively influence different areas of a person's development, making it a crucial area of focus, especially among young adults.

Despite the prevailing pessimistic trend, hope was high in more than half of the sample in both studies. The dimensions constituting hope are the permanence and pervasiveness of negative events, and in both dimensions, the trend was optimistic. High levels of hope refer to viewing the causes of negative events as temporary and specific. This can enhance the perception that one's actions can influence life, limiting hopelessness and nurturing hope during the transition through adverse situations (Seligman, 2006).

On the other hand, dysfunctional cognitions associated with the attribution of causes and emotional bonds are those that predict anxious experiences, both temporarily (state) and more generally or over time (trait) (Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998; Seligman, 2006; Olivares, 2018). Therefore, an optimistic attributional style, hope and a secure attachment style are confirmed as protective factors for mental health,

particularly in the assessment of negative or adverse events. This opens up opportunities for prevention, suggesting the need for psychological and psychoeducational interventions aimed at fostering these protective factors.

With respect to emotional intelligence, it does not moderate the impact of any variable but rather positively predicts psychological well-being and optimistic attribution. Skills associated with emotional intelligence, such as the ability to identify the different emotions and the thoughts that provoke them and regulate them, become personal domains for learning to cultivate optimism and hope, as well as to appreciate a healthy and optimal psychological functioning. The fact that emotional regulation has a negative effect on the way positive and adverse events are interpreted highlights the importance of personal space in controlling and regulating emotional states and its influence on interpretation. If this personal space leads to a more pessimistic attributional style, it is possible that greater control may lead individuals to interpret negative events with more personal responsibility and positive events with less influence. This hypothesis is further supported by the fact that the dimension contributing most to a pessimistic attributional style was personalization, which predicts decreases in self-esteem and is less important than permanence and pervasiveness in predicting depression (Abramson et al., 1978).

The evidence provided by these studies with Venezuelan samples reinforces the association of a pessimistic explanatory style as a factor of vulnerability or predisposition to developing different forms of psychological distress. Additionally, it highlights the preventive opportunities available by guiding psychological and psychoeducational interventions towards the development of healthy, optimistic and hopeful thinking styles, alongside addressing personal dimensions and self-esteem, and fostering secure attachments.



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