

Cognitive Attributions in Depression: Bridging the Gap Between Research and Clinical Practice

Liza M. Rubenstein and Rachel D. Freed
Temple University

Benjamin G. Shapero
Massachusetts General Hospital,
Boston, Massachusetts

Robert L. Fauber and Lauren B. Alloy
Temple University

Individuals seeking treatment for depression are often struggling with maladaptive cognitions that impact how they view themselves and the world. Research on cognitive attributions that underlie depressed mood focuses on the phenomenon of negative cognitive style, in which depressed people tend to view undesirable occurrences in life as having internal, stable, and global causes. On the basis of research, clinicians have developed various techniques that seek to modify depressive attributions in order to alleviate symptoms of depression. In this article, the authors review the literature on attributions in depression, present clinically relevant interventions based on empirical support, provide case examples, and summarize future directions and recommendations for researchers and practitioners.

Keywords: attribution, depression, negative cognitive style

Two employees at the same company are fired from their jobs. The first employee thinks, “The boss was pretty unfair! I need to pay better attention to the boss’s expectations so that I can do better on the next job.” The second employee thinks, “I’m an idiot! I will never get another job, and I’m a failure at everything I try.” These individuals are apt to experience quite different emotions in response to their thoughts, the latter feeling much more hopeless and dejected. This begs the question, why do these two people have such different thoughts about and emo-

tional reactions to the same life experience? Attribution theories of depression were formulated to answer these questions and in the process better understand the etiology and maintenance of depression. These theories posit that the ways in which individuals interpret life events contributes to their mood state and to the likelihood that they will experience clinical depression. Theory and subsequent empirical evidence about the role of attributions in depression have paved the way for effective therapeutic approaches focused on altering these maladaptive thinking patterns. In this article, we present the attribution theories of depression, discuss basic psychological research testing these theories, and provide information about how this research can inform interventions, including specific techniques for working with individuals with depression.

Attributional Models of Depression

In his *learned helplessness model of depression*, Seligman (1975) proposed that the way individuals view negative events may impact their affective experience. This initial theory was further refined in the *reformulated learned*

This article was published Online First February 25, 2016.

Liza M. Rubenstein and Rachel D. Freed, Department of Psychology, Temple University; Benjamin G. Shapero, Depression Clinical and Research Program, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts; Robert L. Fauber and Lauren B. Alloy, Department of Psychology, Temple University.

Preparation of this article was supported by National Institute of Mental Health Grant MH101168 to Lauren B. Alloy.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Lauren B. Alloy, Department of Psychology, Temple University, Weiss Hall, 1701 North 13th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19122. E-mail: lalloy@temple.edu