**ABSTRACT**

A pessimistic attributional style has been shown to be a robust risk factor in the future occurrence of a depressive disorder. One-hundred thirteen college students with a pessimistic attributional style were identified from a larger screening sample that completed measures of attributional style, depression, and physical health symptoms. Participants were randomly assigned to Self-Administered Optimism Training (SOT; n = 53) or a no-treatment control group (n = 50). In the SOT condition, participants received 10 minutes of instruction regarding self-monitoring of how they assigned causes to events in their lives and “brainstorming” alternate causes, and then sent off to record daily diaries that captured this information every day for 28 days. Participants returned their completed diaries each week. Approximately six weeks after this 28-day period all participants were re-assessed using identical instruments. SOT participants demonstrated significant drops in explanatory style (Cohen’s $f$ = .44). Inspection of the relationship between cognitive change and depression symptom change indicated that improvements in the former resulted in improvements in the latter for the SOT group, but not the control group. These findings correspond to medium effect sizes.

**METHODS**

- **Participants**
  - 113 undergraduate students
  - Pessimistic upper quartile of students (using EASQ) from a larger screening sample were contacted to participate
  - 22% male, 78% female
  - 2% Asian, 6% African American, 80% Caucasian, 12% Other
  - Participants ranged from 17-38 years of age ($M = 19.23$, $SD = 2.8$)

- **Measures**
  - Expanded Attributional Style Questionnaire (EASQ; Peterson & Villanova, 1988)
  - Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979)
  - Daily Attributions Questionnaire (DAQ; Fresco & Craighead, 1993)

- **RESULTS**
  - Significant main effect for Group, $F(1, 110) = 9.24$, $p = .004$, indicating an overall drop in pessimism over time.
  - Significant main effect for Time, $F(1, 110) = 19.23$, $p < .001$, indicating significant change over time.
  - Significant main effect for Group x Time, $F(1, 110) = 4.20$, $p = .04$, indicating differential prediction of change in depression by cognitive change between the two groups, and if significant would indicate the different processes of change that was predicted between the groups. As predicted, the interaction term was significant and corresponded to a small-to-medium effect (see Table 1). Inspection of the correlations between the treatment and control groups indicates that the relation between these two variables was stronger in the SOT group than in the control group.
  - Significant main effect for Group x Time x Attributional Change Score, $F(1, 110) = 4.8$, $p = .03$, indicating that the contribution of the source of the rating contributed neither to pre-treatment attributional style ($f = .094$, $p = .11$), nor to the follow-up attributional style ($f = .40$, $p = .04$), nor to the attributional change ($f = .42$, $p = .01$).
  - Significant main effect for Group x Time x Attributional Change Score, $F(1, 110) = 4.8$, $p = .03$, indicating that the contribution of the source of the rating contributed neither to pre-treatment attributional style ($f = .094$, $p = .11$), nor to the follow-up attributional style ($f = .40$, $p = .04$), nor to the attributional change ($f = .42$, $p = .01$).

- **DISCUSSION**
  - Findings support our hypothesis that SOT results in significant drops in pessimism, in addition:
    - SOT participants with low Time 2 Depression evidenced larger drops in pessimism as compared to Control participants
    - Counter to our expectations, “brainstormed” ratings were higher in pessimism than initial ones across all time points; although speculative, one possible explanation for this finding is the observation that a pessimistic attributional style is associated with rumination responses to stress (Zullow & Seligman, 1990).
  - The process of self-monitoring and attributional challenging may engage this ruminative process in the short-run, even though the findings indicate an overall drop in pessimism over time.
  - **Limitations**
    - Participants consisted of relatively high-functioning college students, resulting in uncertain generalizability to the general public
    - The lack of a long-term follow-up leaves open the question of whether or not SOT results in long-term resilience to depressive episodes
    - Without measures such as rumination, questions as to the mechanisms of SOT remain unanswered
  - **Future Studies**
    - Replicating the current study utilizing a more representative population, with long-term follow-up and assessment of clinical depressive episodes
    - Research has shown that increasing a wider awareness of context can prevent the effects of a negative mood prime (Wabnis, et al., 2003).

**REFERENCES**