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**ENHANCING EXPLANATORY STYLE,  
WELL-BEING & COGNITIVE COPING  
IN OLDER ADULTS:  
A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION**

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The beliefs that a person holds about the origin, pervasiveness, and potential recurrence of life events is referred to as 'explanatory style'. Explanatory style is a theoretical approach to optimism. Previous studies are unclear about the specific role that explanatory style has in the well-being of older adults and how it relates to their coping style. Furthermore, interventions that directly target explanatory style have not yet been trialed with older adult samples.

The current study is separated into two parts using a sample of one hundred and thirty older adults' from fifteen community organisations in New Zealand. Part one evaluates explanatory style and its relationship to their well-being and the cognitive coping strategies they use. Part two evaluates the effectiveness of a one-month self-help cognitive optimism intervention. This optimism intervention was initially developed by Fresco and Craighead (1993) and was modified and pilot tested for the current study, for suitability, clarity, and readability. After the pilot test, a controlled experiment was conducted using two groups. The treatment group received a cognitive self-help optimism intervention, while the control group received an event-recording task to complete over four weeks. Treatment outcome measures were administered at pre-treatment, post-treatment, and follow-up.

Findings indicate that older adults have high levels of optimism and well-being and that these two variables are only moderately correlated. Theories of socio-emotional selectivity and realistic optimism help to explain these findings. Results also suggest that catastrophising, rumination and blaming are maladaptive coping strategies while positive reappraisal, putting into perspective, and refocusing on planning are adaptive in older adults.

There was mixed evidence regarding the effectiveness of the self-help optimism intervention. Quantitative results showed no significant change in explanatory style and well-being for the whole treatment group. Although pessimistic participants experienced a significant increase in optimism, this is likely due to regression toward the mean. Nevertheless, qualitative results indicated that the intervention was

somewhat helpful for putting into perspective and reappraising problems. Both the treatment and control group experienced significant reductions in self-blame, rumination, and catastrophising, indicating that the task of recording good and bad events may be helpful. The limitations of the current study and recommendations for future research are discussed.

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## **THESIS OVERVIEW**

The current exploration began with researching a theory of optimism called ‘explanatory style’, which is interweaved throughout both the established literature on mental health and the more recent literature on positive psychology. The decision to explore explanatory style in older adults developed from an interest in conflicting theories about this unique age group’s well-being. Some theories propose that emotional problems are inevitable due to the accumulation of losses, indicating that they are pessimistic. However, other theories emphasise older adults’ comparatively happy and content outlook, suggesting an optimistic stance. A number of questions arise from these contrasting perspectives – are older adults in fact optimistic? Does optimism make a difference to their well-being? How do optimistic older adults cope with stress and loss? And, would they benefit from an existing self-help intervention that directly targets pessimistic explanatory style? The answers to these questions have not yet been explored in a non-clinical community sample of older adults. If the intervention outcomes were positive, then implementation of the intervention on a larger scale could reduce future strain on mental health services due to the current aging population.

This thesis is separated into eight chapters. Chapters One to Four review relevant literature. Chapter One provides an overview of the literature on normal aging theories and the emotional problems in late life. The second chapter explores the origin, the characteristics, and the current research on explanatory style, especially as related to older adults. Differences from younger age groups are highlighted and the relationship between optimism and other coping strategies is explored. Chapter Three focuses on various types of interventions including cognitive-behavioural therapy, positive psychology, and self-help and their effectiveness with older adults. The fourth chapter explores the interventions specifically developed to increase optimism and introduces a promising study that was modified for the present study. Chapter Five lists the specific research questions, hypotheses, and rationale for the current study alongside the adaptations made from previous studies. Chapter Six includes the methodology, which describes the participants, procedures, materials, and data

analysis techniques. Results are presented in Chapter Seven and these are discussed in the context of previous research in Chapter Eight.