

**Title:** Attributional Feedback Alters Short-Term Persistence After Failure

**Subject Area:** Personality/Social

**Keywords:** Applied Experimental

**Authors:** N. C. Higgins, *St. Thomas University*  
Mitchell LaPointe, *University of Lethbridge*

**Abstract:** The present study examined attributional styles and the effects of attributional feedback on expectations, emotions, and persistence behavior during repeated failure. Those with a functional attributional style who received functional feedback maintained higher expectations and hopefulness for future success (next trial), and showed greater persistence in the face of failure.

**Supporting Summary:** You get a D in a course required for your Major. Why? "The professor is a hard marker"; "I didn't study enough"; "I was out sick a lot." Teachers/professors hear many versions of causal explanations for poor performance by students. Because causal explanations (attributions) can have constructive or debilitating effects on how a person approaches future events, they have been examined in a number of domains including academic achievement (Craven, March, & Debus, 1991; Follette & Jacobson, 1987; Perry & Magnusson, 1989; Weiner, 1985), sports achievement (Graham, Kowalski, & Crocker, 2001; LeFoll, Rasclé, & Higgins, 2006; 2007; Rasclé, LeFoll, & Higgins, 2008; Spray, et al., 2005), and interpersonal relations (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Higgins & Shaw, 1999; Juvonen & Murdock, 1993; Lundquist, Higgins, & Prkachin, 2002).

The way a person habitually explains outcomes, termed explanatory or attributional style (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978), has been shown to not only shape the way we see challenges in the present but also the way we approach challenges in the future. When a person habitually explains negative outcomes, such as failing an exam, using causes that are internal, unstable, and controllable (e.g., low effort), they exhibit a functional attributional style and interpret past performance as being modifiable through exerting greater effort or using different strategies. When a person habitually explains academic failure using causes that are external, stable, and uncontrollable (e.g., low ability) they exhibit a dysfunctional attributional style and view past performance as being unchangeable (Peterson & Barrett, 1987; Weiner, 1992; Wilson & Linville, 1985). Recent studies have also shown that different types of attributional feedback about failure can influence people's explanations and persistence behavior (Craven, Marsh, & Debus, 1991; LeFoll et al., 2007; Rasclé et al., 2008; Martin & Marsh, 2006).

The present study examined attributional styles and the effects of attributional feedback on attributions, expectations, emotions, and persistence behavior during repeated failure in an academic task. Persistence, attributions, emotions, and expectations were measured before and after the feedback. Subjects included 80 volunteers who were randomly assigned to the feedback groups and who completed a series of questionnaires and a set of test trials. Although all of the subjects became less optimistic (expecting less success on the next trial) prior to each new trial, it was the functional attributional style group that continued to expect to do better while the dysfunctional attributional style group's expectations dropped dramatically over the trials. When coupled with attributional style, the type of feedback had a powerful effect on persistence. Those with a functional attributional style who received functional feedback maintained higher expectations and hopefulness for future trials, and showed greater persistence. Those with a dysfunctional attributional style who received dysfunctional feedback dropped substantially in their expectations and hopefulness from trial to trial, and showed little or no tendency to persist. Research on attributional styles and their link to persistence behavior is essential to find ways to deliver feedback to students that is constructive and inspiring enough to positively change high school drop-rates and under-achievement.

Presented at the 21<sup>st</sup> Annual Convention of the Association for Psychological Science, San Francisco, CA, May, 2009. Please do not cite without permission of the first author.