Hello and welcome to the Student Attributions and Emotions: Problems and Solutions presentation.

In the last unit you were introduced to the 4 factors of motivation – value, self-efficacy, attributions and emotions with specific focus and practice items related to the first 2 – value and self-efficacy. In this unit we more thoroughly cover the last 2 factors of attribution and emotion.

This presentation contains audio, so please make sure your speakers are turned up on your computer. Click the forward button below to proceed to the next slide.
As learned in the last unit, students' values and self-efficacy are ongoing issues in their academic motivation. We all have many competing goals and we constantly encounter problems that challenge our self-confidence. Yet, there are two additional factors that cause motivation problems. Both of them happen after people experience “bumps” in their academic programs. We turn to these two final factors next – student attributions and emotions.

The next two types of motivation problems tend to appear only after students have experienced an academic difficulty such as a much lower than expected grade on a project or quiz. Research has demonstrated that whenever we have an experience that is negative, unexpected and/or novel we are driven to find a reason or “attribution” for the cause of the experience (B. Weiner, 1985; 2008).
The most important element in the reasons we use to explain our problems or failures is whether we believe we can solve the problem with persistence and effort. If we believe that we can control the problem with more effort, we may feel bad but we will not experience a motivational crisis. Only when students feel that they cannot solve their academic problems with effort are they in trouble motivationally. You and your students must believe that they can succeed with effort.

Attribution theory recognizes four types or qualities of attributions. We'll define each type and provide an example.
Academic attributions are beliefs about the causes students (and faculty) assign to events that are negative (e.g. a failed quiz or a poor grade on a paper), or unexpected (e.g. corrective feedback from an instructor when the student believed his or her work was excellent). (B. Weiner, 1995)
As we have learned academic attributions are beliefs about the causes students (and faculty) assign to events that are negative or unexpected. Types of attributions are classified as internal or external as well as controllable or uncontrollable.

**Internal Attributions**
Internal attributions are belief that I or we caused the negative or unexpected event with something we did or did not do.

*Example:* I was sick or I had too much to do and could not spend the time the assignment required.

**External Attributions**
External attributions are beliefs that the negative or unexpected event was caused by something that someone else did or did not do.

*Example:* My instructor gave a nearly impossible test or was harsh in their evaluation of my project and is probably biased against people like me.

**Controllable Attribution**
Controllable attributions are beliefs that the internal or external cause of the event can be reversed or avoided with direct or indirect effort.
Example: I thought I could get away with only a quick review of the reading but realized that I’d misjudged and know now that I need to read more carefully and perhaps more than once.

Uncontrollable Attribution

Uncontrollable attributions are those in which the internal or external cause of the negative or unexpected event can’t be changed or avoided.

Example: Students might say or imply “I am just not smart enough to learn the material in this course” or “I simply can’t do anything about the problem that is preventing me from succeeding at this task”.
Students cripple themselves when they attribute their academic problems to “uncontrollable” causes. This is the case regardless of whether the causes are internal or external.

The solution to attribution problems is to help students “reattribute” their problems to a controllable cause – most often the lack of their own time and effort.

Reattribute strategy

If students tell you that they can’t do anything about their problem(s), suggest that they ask themselves a couple of questions.

First, what would happen if they had all of the time they needed to deal with the problem without having to handle other issues at the same time? Could they succeed?

If the answer is yes, then tell them that the problem is solvable provided they invest more effort.

If they tell you that they can’t ignore other issues, then remind them that they are making a decision not to solve the problem because other issues are more important to them.

Second, ask them to think about the worst thing that could happen if they spent the time necessary to succeed at their academic work.
If they become emotional, then use active listening.

If they mention a “worst” consequence that is unlikely, then ask them whether they think it will happen and whether more effort on the academic task will be more likely to pay off for them.

Third, ask them to think creatively about a way they could spend more time and effort on their academic work. Offer whatever help you can give if you feel that their problem is genuine.

Example:
What follows is a reenactment of a summary of a discussion one of your colleagues experienced with a student. The instructor tried the “retribution” strategy described in this lesson. Notice that your colleague also started out with the LiSA listening approach.

Professor – To recap what you just said Freddie, you are spending all your time helping your girlfriend’s father start up his business and haven’t had enough time to do your school work, is that correct?
Freddie – Yes.
Professor – Tell me this Freddie: if you had all the time you needed, could you do the work required for this course?
Freddie – Sure I could.
Professor – So if you put more time and effort into the class that would solve the problem, correct?
Freddie – It isn’t that simple Professor.
Professor – But maybe it is Freddie. If there isn’t a way to do both, then it comes down to a question of priorities. Which is more important to you: your girlfriend’s dad’s business, or your education?
Freddie – I’ve got to tell you professor, that’s a tough one.
Professor – OK, how about this: what is the worst thing that could happen if you told your girlfriend’s dad that you couldn’t help anymore because you have to do your school work?
Freddie – You mean besides losing my girlfriend?
Professor – I think that you will agree that that probably won’t happen.
Freddie – Well, I guess he would have to hire someone to take my place.
Professor – So the question then becomes which is more important – him having to pay someone or you getting an education? Also, you could probably still do some work for him. But it would have to be after your schoolwork is done. He might respect you even more for wanting to be successful in school. Does that seem reasonable?
The final factor that has a significant influence on motivation is emotion. Many Kaplan University students experience many challenges because of multiple conflicting commitments and limited resources.

Academic emotions can be defined as feeling states that are intense, durable and relate directly to achievement activities, expectations or outcomes (Pekrun, 2006).
Introduction

As positive emotions increase, motivation is facilitated but as negative emotions increase, the reverse happens and motivation is inhibited. It is interesting that there is also evidence that for teachers, positive emotions are more of a boost to motivation and that in most cases negative emotions are not a major barrier (Morgan, et al, 2009).

Teachers apparently look for positive indicators that they are making a difference with students and/or that their skills are recognized and valued. Positive indicators are sources of positive motivation that help instructors handle negative teaching experiences.

Example Academic Emotions

Emotions can range from positive (joy, happiness) to negative (anger, depression). Anger is an emotion that sometimes results from attributing the cause of a negative experience to someone or something outside of ourselves. Depression sometimes results from attributing the cause of a negative experience to ourselves.

Think back to a time when you were a student and felt angry or depressed about a challenging task. Were you able to perform at your peak despite your feelings? Some students find it very difficult to ignore strong negative emotions and tend to express them at times when it would be wiser to repress them. Thus, our focus is on negative emotions because when students are angry or depressed, they are less likely to perform at their peak in classes and more likely to
express them to faculty.

The LiSA procedure described in Unit Two is the best way to react when students express strong emotions, yet we can learn something about student attributions from the emotions they express.

The type of negative emotion students are experiencing can indicate the attribution they’ve made for a negative experience. Students who are angry may have attributed the cause externally (“Someone or something else caused the problem”). Depressed students may have made an internal attribution (“I caused the problem or I let it happen”). The important element in the attribution is not whether it is external or internal but whether students believe that they can change or control the outcome of the experience.

Solutions to Emotion Problems

In general, motivation is facilitated when instructors approach students in a positive, optimistic manner and try to develop a supportive, encouraging relationship with individual students.

If students express strong negative emotions related to their academic work, then it is best if you respond with active listening using LiSA and summarize back what they told you in a non-judgmental fashion, try to get a sense of their belief about the controllability of the emotional experience as well as their values and self-efficacy related to the tasks at hand.

If students are experiencing strong negative emotions, it is often best not to try to give advice or solve their problems immediately. Instead, consider telling them that you want to think about ways that you might help and that you will get back to them the next day (and keep your promise). When you get back to them, use the motivational strategies discussed in this module to encourage students to invest effort in the academic strategies that will help them get through their difficulty.

Example:
One of your colleagues received a very angry email from a student who was upset at a number of problems he’d experienced with financial aid. After reading Jamal’s email carefully as part of the LiSA listening strategy, the instructor’s response to the student was as follows:

Hi Jamal – Thank you for confirming my understanding of your problem. Financial aid and money issues are never easy to solve and the feeling that others are not doing their job can be very frustrating so I can understand your anger. I want to make sure you get the help you need. I have contacted my supervisor to get the direct contact information of a supervisor in financial aid. This way, you will be able to speak to someone who is knowledgeable in this area and get your concerns resolved. Please give me a day to get this information and then I will be in touch. If after this your concerns aren’t resolved in a couple days, please reach out to me again and we will look for another solution.
Thank you for taking the time to complete this presentation.

References


