



# *The Positive Power*

JULIE K. NOREM, Ph.D.

# *of Negative Thinking*

**“Refreshingly  
contrarian.”**  
—*The Futurist*

Using  
**DEFENSIVE  
PESSIMISM**  
to Harness  
Anxiety and  
Perform at  
Your Peak

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***The Positive  
Power  
of Negative  
Thinking***

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*To my parents, Rosalie H. Norem,  
Ken Norem, and Sandy Magnuson;  
my husband, Jonathan Cheek;  
and my children, Nathan and Haley*

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*Therefore, since the world has still  
Much good, but much less good than ill,  
And while the sun and moon endure  
Luck's a chance, but the trouble's sure  
I'd face it as a wise man would  
And train for ill and not for good.*

—A. E . HOUSEMAN

## Preamble to a Contrarian View

In all affairs it's a healthy thing now and then to hang a question mark on the things you have long taken for granted.

—BERTRAND RUSSELL

The positive power of *negative* thinking? That proposition sounds almost heretical in American society, bastion of full glasses, silver linings, and the ubiquitous yellow smiley face. Can someone seriously argue that there are benefits to pessimism? That's exactly what I do in this book. *Defensive pessimism* is a strategy that can help anxious people harness their anxiety so that it works for rather than against them.

Defensive pessimists expect the worst and spend lots of time and energy mentally rehearsing, in vivid, daunting detail, exactly how things might go wrong. Before a business presentation, they worry that PowerPoint might fail, that the microphone will go dead, that—worst of all—they will stare out at the audience and go blank. Before a dinner party they imagine that the new neighbors will clash with the old and the sushi will give everyone food poisoning.

Where's the power in this? Don't these negative imaginings leave us whimpering helplessly at the prospect of disaster? Why not be optimistic instead, look on the bright side, think positive thoughts, and give it our best shot? After all, research shows that for many people, optimism is related both to feeling better and trying harder.

Accentuating the positive is not bad advice, but it suffers from the same problem that plagues “one size fits all” clothing: People come in more than one size. Different people face different situations, encounter different obstacles, and have different personalities. Trying to squeeze everyone into a single optimistic perspective can be both uncomfortable and unproductive, like struggling to stuff a queen-size body into petitesizec pantyhose.

“RELAX—IT'LL ALL WORK OUT” simply isn't always true. We have to *make* things work for ourselves. Trying to adopt a positive outlook when we are anxious—an outlook that discounts or ignores anxiety—can backfire. An anxious business person who denies or ignores her anxiety before a presentation actually *increases* the likelihood that she'll stutter, fumble, and lose her train of thought before a live audience; an anxious host who doesn't keep in mind the possibility of food poisoning may leave the fish out too long and wind up chauffeuring his guests to the hospital.

Defensive pessimism is a strategy that helps us to work through our anxious thoughts rather than denying them, so that we may achieve our goals. In this book we'll see how anxious people can turn their anxiety into productive motivation that helps them optimize their performance. Defensive pessimism is emphatically not about leading anxious people into depression; quite the contrary—it can actually aid our efforts toward self-discovery and enhance our personal growth.

I BEGAN STUDYING defensive pessimism back in the mid- 1980s, when I was in graduate school. Research on the benefits of optimism was very “hot,” and looking into the potential advantages of pessimistic perspectives automatically appealed to my contrarian side. Besides, à la *Rashomon*, I've always been intrigued by the ways that people participating in the same conversation or witnessing the

same event could have radically different experiences, which is just how it is with my married friend Katherine and Bill, whose clashing strategies open the next chapter.

Once I began to look, I found myself surrounded by people who were notably successful, but not, by any definition, and *not* notably optimistic. According to the research on optimism, that shouldn't be. Pessimism should produce negative results. When we set low expectations, we initiate a self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, if we convince ourselves that we'll never pass the test to get our driver's license, we won't spend time studying the manual and practicing how to parallel park. Once we get to the test, we'll have no idea how many feet we're supposed to be behind the car in front of us when it is foggy. Then sure enough, just as we expected, we won't pass the test.

But that discouraging description didn't fit all of the pessimists I saw around me. For example, my mentor at the time, a dynamic and successful woman who personified defensive pessimism (and who coined the term), utterly defied the prevailing wisdom that we have to be relentlessly positive to get ahead. Before every professional event in her life, she would regale me with an impressive and impassioned and precise description of the failure and humiliation that awaited her ("So-and-so will be sure to ask about some arcane study that I've never heard of"; "I'll look like a little girl behind that huge lectern, and no one will take me seriously"), but somehow that failure never materialized. Instead, she always passed the test and achieved whatever she pursued; her career trajectory was and is straight up.

There was plenty of research that indicated that people like her should be depressed, sick, unmotivated, helpless, and hopeless—yet they certainly didn't seem that way to me. The researcher who drove me to understand these people who apparently contradicted a well-established body of research. Why wasn't their pessimism debilitating? At first, I asked how these people were able to do so well *despite* their pessimism. Before long, however, I began to realize that they were doing so well *because* of their pessimism—and that's when things got really interesting. I began to understand that their pessimism wasn't just pessimism; it was something more. *Defensive* pessimism encompassed an entire process by which negative thinking transformed anxiety into action.

Since then, I have been gathering information about these people to demonstrate how defensive pessimism works as an adaptive strategy when we're anxious. I have run laboratory experiments that allowed me to take apart and tinker with people's strategies to figure out which parts do what and have conducted more naturalistic field studies that measured the influence of strategies in real-life situations. I have interviewed dozens of people—both defensive pessimists and those who use other strategies—whose life stories add richness, depth, and complexity to the numbers generated by other research.

Throughout this book I use anecdotes from people I have interviewed (though I don't use their real names), as well as empirical research (my own and others') and observation to illustrate and animate these strategies. After eighteen years of research—years of testing hypotheses, watching and talking to people, trying to integrate results in numbers with the results from people-watching—I have a surprisingly optimistic story to tell about defensive pessimism. This story illustrates how anxious people crawl out from under their protective covers and face the world and their fears. It stars defensive pessimists, whose personalities reveal why their strategy fits them well and whose progress allows us to see how the strategy works; it features people who have developed alternative strategies, some of which work well and some of which do not.

I'll introduce Katherine and Daniel, defensive pessimists who have built satisfying and successful lives by confronting the dark side. We'll follow them as they anticipate disaster but, paradoxically, produce triumph in both professional and personal situations. Along the way, they'll tell us how



learning to manage, rather than banish, their negative emotions has opened the way for ongoing personal growth and development of a clearer sense of who they are and who they can become.

Throughout the book, I'll assess both the costs and the benefits of defensive pessimism by comparing it to other strategies. Bill—who happens to be Katherine's husband and Daniel's business partner—is an optimist, and as we'll see, his optimism is also a strategy. It contrasts markedly with defensive pessimism and illustrates both the much-heralded benefits *and* the hidden costs of always looking for the silver lining.

Bill's strategic optimism works well for him, just as defensive pessimism works well for Katherine and Daniel. Both of these strategies can be effective, but we'll see that they are far from being easily interchangeable. We can't casually adopt another person's strategy and expect it to work for us, any more than we can put their shoes on and expect to be comfortable. To work, strategies need to fit the people who use them. Indeed, we may find blisters instead of bliss if we aren't careful to equip ourselves properly. Trying on the components of strategic optimism that work for Bill actually amplifies anxiety for Katherine and Daniel; similarly, if Bill tried to become a defensive pessimist, it could *create*, rather than forestall, anxiety for him.

However, some people may find that defensive pessimism fits *better* than their current strategies if those strategies leave them floundering because of their anxiety. Our cast of characters will also include anxious types whose strategies don't stack up well against defensive pessimism, like Jeff, the avoider, who was the high school whiz kid, full of promise, but who is now confined to lonely, dead-end jobs because he's too afraid to try for more. And many of us will recognize ourselves in Mindy—the self-handicapper who copes with her anxiety by making sure she always has an excuse ready (“I couldn't find the files”; “I rushed to do it at the last minute”). She protects herself by never laying her best work on the line, but relying on her handicaps is ultimately costly. Her career and her relationships suffer because she cannot confront the world head-on.

For those of us who resemble Jeff and Mindy, defensive pessimism offers an alternative strategy for managing our anxiety and facing our fears. And although Bill's strategic optimism works for him, there are also optimists who have realized that their brand of optimism—especially if it is based on denial of the negative possibilities—isn't working for them. Too many times they have found themselves unprepared and off guard. They don't consider potential delays and are repeatedly late meeting their deadlines; a series of unanticipated disasters has left them shaken and shell-shocked. For each of these groups, learning how and why defensive pessimism works can pave the way for a strategy change that transforms victims into agents. I'll examine when changing strategies is a good idea, how to find a strategy that fits, and how to identify the obstacles to change and the routes to effective change.

I'VE BEEN WRITING this book in my head ever since my first research studies on defensive pessimism were published in psychology journals, but what finally convinced me to commit to actual paper was hearing the same reactions over and over whenever I talked about the strategy. Many who have never before heard anything positive about their own negative thinking respond with flashes of recognition as I describe defensive pessimism and palpable relief when I argue that it works.

People tell me that they feel vindicated when they learn that there is actually a name for their approach and evidence of its effectiveness. I remember especially the woman who rushed up to me after one talk and said, “I'm so glad my mother and my sisters were here with me! They've always worried so much about the way I am. Now I can just remind them that I'm a defensive pessimist and they don't have to keep trying to change me.”

People who aren't defensive pessimists often remark that for the first time they understand why certain of their friends, families, or coworkers are doing, which makes it easier to tolerate. "I always thought I was supposed to try to cheer her up when she went on about things not working out," commented one surprised boyfriend. "But I have to admit that that got old pretty quickly—especially since she never responded very well when I tried. I guess I should just back off and let her work through her way. I think that will actually be a relief to both of us."

Couples and coworkers who use different strategies also say that they are amazed at how often their disagreements or conflicts are related to those differences. A trio of nurses smiled as they described their ongoing struggles to cope with each other's strategies: "I'm clearly the defensive pessimist in the group, and they're always ganging up on me when I do all my negative stuff like worrying about whether the doses are right and nagging the doctors about their scrawls on patient charts," said one woman. "Maybe now they'll appreciate having me around more." The other two women laughed, and one remarked, "Well, I don't know about that, but at least now we can see that she's not trying to depress us on purpose." Having names for differences, and having a window on how one another's strategies work, helps to de-escalate conflict. Recognizing the sources of the frictions helps people to respond with humor and even, potentially, to appreciate the merits of other approaches.

ONE OF THE MOST memorable experiences I've had while studying defensive pessimism occurred several years ago, when the research had just gotten off the ground, and I was a relative newcomer to the field. I was addressing a roomful of senior colleagues—of course everyone was senior to me then. I started by describing the results of several experiments that showed how defensive pessimism actually *helped* those who used it to perform well. Then I expanded on what I saw as the advantages of defensive pessimism—it helps us confront rather than deny our negative feelings, it transforms anxiety into a facilitating rather than debilitating emotion—and described people whose successes illustrated my points. Finally, and quite daringly, I thought, I critiqued the tendency I saw in the field to assume that positive thinking was always best for everyone.

Relieved defensive pessimists from the audience crowded around the podium at the end of the speech. I spent almost an hour answering questions, being regaled with stories, and eagerly copying down research ideas. After the crush slowly trickled away, I stepped down from the podium to find a well-established senior researcher waiting patiently to talk to me. With avuncular concern, he took me aside and gently explained that I had apparently fallen victim to a common syndrome among young researchers—the tendency to turn the faults of the people or process one is studying into virtues. He went on to assure me that—despite the evidence I'd presented, which had come from carefully designed experiments and been analyzed with appropriate statistical techniques—it was only a fluke that I'd managed to find successful defensive pessimists. Surely, he protested (as his concern transformed into irritation), I couldn't seriously think that there were advantages to pessimism, much less disadvantages to optimism?

In fact, I did think—and continue to think—just that. Lest I be accused of exaggerating its virtues, however, I should make clear from the outset that I *don't* think defensive pessimism is the ultimate solution to the world's problems, or even to the problems of any particular couple or individual. Defensive pessimists are neither saints nor paragons, and defensive pessimism has both costs and benefits. People are different, and what works well for some people may not work well for others—that's the point. (And what works well in some situations may not work well in all situations.) The costs and benefits of any strategy depend on who is using the strategy and what the circumstances are.

My senior colleague's comment obviously didn't convince me that I was wrong in trying to identify the merits of defensive pessimism. It did, however, illustrate for me how difficult it can be for people who have embraced the power of positive thinking to accept those merits. That's a lesson I relearn almost daily—and it continues to surprise me. We at least pay lip service to the advantages of racial, ethnic, religious, and gender diversity, but we have enormous difficulty recognizing the legitimacy—and potential advantages—of personality differences.

Most people in American culture strongly believe in the power of positive thinking. Within my field, "positive psychology" is a movement that's become a juggernaut, barreling into the public eye via newspapers, magazines, books, and the Internet. Its influence generally reinforces popular beliefs, even though the leaders of positive psychology actually promote a message that is more textured and more extensive than "look on the bright side" or "think positively." I'll be examining that message more specifically as I contrast defensive pessimism with positive thinking strategies and I review what the research tells us about the potential pitfalls of different strategies.

Precisely because the positivity zeitgeist is so strong and compelling, we need to work to reframe the oversimplified picture that equates optimism with all that is good and pessimism with all that is evil. Addressing the positive power of negative thinking will expose, and encourage us to explore, some of the assumptions we make about positive thinking—and even some of the costs of optimism which we may underestimate or fail to notice.

Arguing for the benefits of negative thinking is contrary only to the assumption that optimism is an unadulterated virtue. It is not contrary to the aims of positive psychology, which include understanding how people can realize their full potential. Indeed, *negative thinking is positive psychology* when it helps, as defensive pessimism does, people achieve their goals.

# Accentuating the Negative

## A STRATEGY, NOT A SYMPTOM

Pessimists have only pleasant surprises . . .

—NERO WOLFE

### THE DEFENSIVE PESSIMIST

Katherine is a successful sociology professor at an elite university. She's bright, she works hard, and she's enthusiastic about her work. You might be surprised to discover that Katherine is also often pessimistic. When she's planning a research project, putting together a panel of speakers for a campus event, or even arranging a colleague's retirement dinner, she's convinced that everything will be a disaster. She obsesses about every detail and agonizes about all the things that could go wrong. Of course, all of us who know her are quite confident that everything will turn out well: The research will be illuminating, the speakers will be interesting, the dinner will be a glorious success—and the vast majority of the time, we're right.

Katherine is married to Bill.

### THE STRATEGIC OPTIMIST

Bill is a partner in a successful architectural firm and an upbeat, cheerful guy. Bill is quite popular both at work and in his social circle; he radiates energy, and people respond well to his obvious self-confidence and good humor. Bill rarely hesitates before agreeing to a new endeavor, and he is uniformly encouraging to those who approach him with ideas they would like to pursue. He has no patience, however, for naysayers. When his wife questions whether they can really get twelve errands done before they have to get to the airport to catch their flight, he rolls his eyes. When his partner Daniel, brings up potential problems as they prepare for a presentation to a client, he laughs, first in mock exasperation, and then—if Daniel persists—with real irritation. Before their presentation, Bill will distract himself by answering e-mails or relax by browsing through travel brochures.

### COMPARING STRATEGIES

Katherine and Bill are similar in many ways: Both are intelligent and highly educated; they both have good jobs and a network of caring friends and family. Clinical psychologists would describe them as “high-functioning,” which means that they get through the day without major disruptions from whatever psychological “issues” they may have. They pretty much get done what needs to be done—and, importantly, they also get done most of what they *want* to get done.

They are strikingly different, however, in at least one respect: They take very different approaches to pursuing the goals that are important to them. Specifically, they use very different strategies for

dealing with the anxiety that can derail their attempts to accomplish what they want to do. The approaches are so different that each has difficulty understanding how the other's strategy can make sense.

Katherine uses defensive pessimism. She sets low expectations for upcoming situations or even and then reviews all the outcomes she can imagine. She spends a lot of time and energy mentally rehearsing or "playing through" the possibilities until she has a clear idea of everything she needs to do in order to have the best shot at success.

Why does Katherine, time after time, continue to be pessimistic and continue to reflect endlessly on all the things that might go wrong? Why does she put herself and those around her through all that extra agony and hassle rather than simply recognizing that things have gone well in the past, they are likely to go well in the future, and all this fuss and worry is unnecessary?

The answer is that Katherine continues to use defensive pessimism because it works for her in empowering ways. Katherine is anxious about things like publishing her research, taking responsibility for public events, and making sure that special occasions are special enough. She knows that the past can't guarantee the future, so she takes control of both her own anxiety and the situation she's in charge of by focusing on the potential downside when she prepares for upcoming events. She spends time mulling over whether aging Professor Smith will be able to hear if she puts him at the middle table for the retirement dinner, whether Professor Jones can be trusted not to tell off-color jokes if she lets him give a toast, and whether her retiring colleague's quarreling students will be able to sit at the same table without obvious hostility during the festivities. She can't control their behavior completely, but rather than simply worry about it all through the dinner, she will do her best to anticipate, and then fend off, the disasters that she can foresee.

Other people often find her negativity off-putting, at least until they understand its function. Her husband, Bill, sometimes feels as if Katherine is being negative "on purpose"—for no reason other than to be irritating. But it's not like that at all. Katherine is an anxious person—she would feel right at home in a Woody Allen movie. Defensive pessimism is the way she manages her anxiety so that it doesn't keep her from doing what she wants to do.

WHEN BILL SEES how people like Katherine or his business partner, Daniel (who, perhaps not coincidentally, is also a defensive pessimist), go about their work—their lives—he simply doesn't understand what all the fuss is about. For Bill and those like him, the best course of action is simply to do what needs to be done without a lot of reflection and without angst. Bill would never describe himself as anxious or pessimistic. Indeed, the closest he might get is to say that all the ruminations Katherine and Daniel insist upon before any important event makes him feel "restless" and that he would much rather just "get on with it." When things go wrong for Bill, his typical reaction is to shrug philosophically, extract whatever consolation he can, and look ahead to the next endeavor. When things go well, he congratulates himself and celebrates his success with those around him.

Bill engages in what I call "strategic optimism": He sets high expectations before an important situation or event and then actively avoids dwelling on how things will go. He works hard and is generally well prepared, but his preparation does not stem from mental rehearsal ahead of time. In fact, he seeks out distractions that help him avoid that kind of rehearsal.

Bill's problem is not that he needs to cope with anxiety as he anticipates upcoming events; instead, he needs to avoid arousing anxiety in the first place. He feels edgy when his partner insists on playing through every contingency because that just creates anxiety that he wouldn't feel otherwise. Bill distracts himself not from actual anxiety but from *potential* anxiety. When he sits back in his chair

read travel brochures, he's already confident that he's done what's necessary for things to go well. For him, further reflection serves no positive purpose.

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AT FIRST GLANCE, it might seem that Bill's strategic optimism is preferable to Katherine's defensive pessimism and that any responsible author ought to be devoting pages to explaining how to adopt that strategy, rather than touting the benefits of negative thinking. And, indeed, there are many psychologists who would agree with that judgment and who "prescribe" optimism for those who are looking to change their outlook on life. Almost any bookstore or library will have plenty of volumes in the self-help section on how to become more optimistic.

But prescribing optimism for everyone misses a fundamental point. Bill and Katherine are using different strategies because they have to meet different challenges; they have different subjective internal problems. Their situations are not different because of the different content of their jobs; their situations are different because of the different content of their psyches.

Simply put, Bill does not typically feel anxious, but Katherine does. She needs a strategy to effectively manage her anxiety, and he needs one that helps him to stay anxiety-free. As we compare strategies, we need to be careful to take into account the psychological situations that those strategies address—and our anxiety (or lack thereof) plays a powerful role in constructing those psychological situations. Strategic optimism offers no way for Katherine to handle her anxiety, and without such a tool, she is vulnerable to all of the potential disruptions anxiety can cause (as we will see in the next chapter). Only after we make sense of the problems to be solved—of Katherine's unique psychological situation—can we adequately compare different solutions.

Strategies, from that perspective, can be understood as tools designed for particular tasks. Bill's strategic optimism is an admirable tool that works well to motivate him and to help prevent him from developing anxiety, just as a hammer works very well for pounding in nails. Strategic optimism, however, does not work for all situations any more than a hammer works for all tasks in carpentry. It makes just about as *Accentuating the Negative* much sense to recommend strategic optimism to someone who is anxious as it does to offer a hammer to someone who needs to screw in a bolt.

It does make sense to evaluate the efficacy of different tools designed for the same job and, based on the results, to recommend the best tool for a particular task. If the psychological task is to manage anxiety so that it not only won't interfere with performance but can actually be harnessed to enhance it, then Katherine's defensive pessimism starts to look like a pretty positive form of negative thinking.

## VARIETIES OF PESSIMISM AND OPTIMISM

Psychologists also use different tools in their attempts to describe and understand how people function. The terms optimism and pessimism, in addition to their meanings in everyday use, describe several distinct concepts in psychology. Unfortunately, we don't all work with the same concepts, yet we draw on many of the same words to describe the phenomena we study. Different researchers, with slightly different aims and perspectives, focus on somewhat different processes. Psychologists working to disseminate their research to the public often adopt the shorthand of "optimism" and "pessimism" to refer to concepts that are different from what nonresearchers mean by those terms. From the outset, then, it is important that we distinguish defensive pessimism and strategic optimism from some of the other kinds of optimism and pessimism out there, starting with a look at the most basic and general kind.

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## Dispositions and Strategies

Some people, “Pollyanna” types, always expect the best in every situation. Others—“nattering nabobs of negativism,” in Spiro Agnew’s memorable phrase—are grimly convinced that disaster lurks around every corner. The terms *dispositional optimism* and *dispositional pessimism* describe those stable tendencies toward either positive or negative expectations.

The term disposition conveys that a characteristic is likely to influence behavior across a variety of situations and is relatively unlikely to change much over time. Dispositionally optimistic children usually grow up to be optimistic adults, and throughout their lives they tend to have positive expectations about relationships, work, recreation—most all of their endeavors. Often there is some genetic influence on our dispositions, and indeed, there is evidence to suggest that genes play a role in the development of dispositional optimism and pessimism (though exactly how big a role is not yet clear). However, whatever genetic influence exists is played out through interactions with the environment; there is no direct relationship between a particular gene and an optimistic or pessimistic disposition.

Dispositional optimism and pessimism are the psychological constructs that most resemble how we use optimism and pessimism in everyday language. When we casually describe people as optimists (“she sees the glass as half full”) or pessimists (“his glass is always half empty”), we don’t necessarily mean that they are as extreme as Pollyanna or the Grinch, but we usually do mean that their characteristic expectations are *either* positive or negative. Most people assume that optimism and pessimism are the opposite ends of the same dimension, implying that the more optimistic you are, the less pessimistic you are, and vice versa.

But people turn out to be complex in ways we don’t notice through casual observation. Sometimes the same person will have *both* positive and negative characteristics: We may expect to win the lottery at the same time that we expect to lose our job. And some people may be hard to describe as *either* optimistic or pessimistic—they don’t seem to have a single, definable outlook or expectation about the future. Thus, it turns out that optimism and pessimism, rather than being opposite ends of the same scale, constitute their own distinct dimensions.

In other words, people may be high in optimism (or medium or low), but that doesn’t necessarily mean that they are low (or medium or high) in pessimism. Someone who will mortgage the house to act on a hot stock tip may also believe that she will never meet the right guy. The two dimensions are correlated, but they are not flip sides of the same thing. Some people are both strongly optimistic and strongly pessimistic (“I’ll be brilliant; they’ll think I’m an idiot”); others are neither particularly optimistic nor particularly the other. And then there are all the permutations in between.

Relatively few people care about whether optimism and pessimism are one dimension or two, but it makes a difference when it comes to understanding the implications of research in our lives. Regular old optimism, for example, has received a lot of credit for its relationship with better physical health, which might lead us to call for clinical interventions that increase optimism in patients. Yet, keeping with the principle of separate dimensions, it may not be the presence of optimism so much as the absence of dispositional pessimism that is important to those reported health benefits—and at least one study has found that to be the case. In that study, despite predictions, optimism itself wasn’t related to blood pressure overall, and when optimists were in a bad mood, their blood pressure was just as high as anyone else’s. It was the level of *pessimism* that was specifically related to chronic

blood pressure levels (more pessimism was related to higher ambulatory blood pressure). If that's the case, then increasing optimism would be less effective than reducing pessimism.

There's a chasm between dispositional and strategic optimism and between dispositional and defensive pessimism, however. Although defensive pessimists are more pessimistic and less optimistic overall than strategic optimists, they are by no means pessimistic all the time or in every situation. Katherine, for instance, is firmly optimistic about her relationships with other people and the world in general—and she even secretly believes that she'll win the Irish Sweepstakes someday. Her pessimism comes out only in specific contexts where her anxiety is acute. Bill—our prototypical strategic optimist—isn't optimistic across the board either; he thinks negatively about money matters for one thing, as well as about many situations in which his daughter (who is just starting to date) is involved.

When we look across different situations in people's lives, we see that strategies, unlike dispositions, may be applied discriminately. Katherine isn't anxious about money (despite the fact that Bill is and despite his efforts to get her to take it more seriously), and consequently, she doesn't need to rely on defensive pessimism when she deals with money matters. Our dispositions are very general, and they influence our overall outlook; our characteristic strategies may surface only in reaction to particular situations or goals.

## Attributional Styles and Strategies

Researchers have also used optimism and pessimism almost as nicknames for much more complex constructs. Several popular books and scores of journal articles address the ways people ordinarily explain the positive and negative things that happen to them. Our explanations are called attributions, and our typical patterns of attributions may be optimistic or pessimistic because of the way they reflect our interpretations of the past and influence our expectations about the future.

Strategic optimists do have an optimistic attributional style, but defensive pessimists do not have the typical pessimistic style. Katherine would never conclude—as those with a pessimistic attributional style would be apt to do—that because students fell asleep or looked confused during one of her lectures, she doesn't have what it takes to be a good teacher. Instead, she would scrounge around for livelier examples and get advice on her use of visual aids, so that the next time she gave that lecture she had done everything possible to make it both captivating and instructive.

Defensive pessimists make attributions, but they don't fit into the stylistic categories of optimistic and pessimistic—their attributions are different from both of those styles.

Strategies in general are also different from attributional styles, because they refer to how we *prepare* for situations, rather than how we explain them after the fact. Although Katherine has a reputation for being obsessive, defensive pessimism doesn't lead her to ruminate on what has already happened; she may draw on past experiences as she prepares for new situations (conjuring up a vivid image of snoring students to spur her preparation for the next semester), but her energies are devoted to the future.

## Positive Illusions

The terms *positive thinking* and *positive illusions* refer to a collection of processes that are all



sometimes lumped together under the heading of optimism. These illusions—mild distortions of reality—sometimes help people maintain a positive sense of self and a feeling of control over their lives. We may selectively remember the good things people say, for example, and “forget” the negative ones, or convince ourselves that our successes are much more indicative of our ability than our failures. Studies show, for example, that when nondepressed people play a video game and are told they’ve done poorly, they tend to deny having had control over their low scores; however, if they are told they’ve done well, they claim that their skill produced their high scores.

These same people often unrealistically underestimate their personal risk of developing a serious illness or being involved in accidents during their lifetime, and they are likely to overestimate their personal contributions to group endeavors. They believe that even though they smoke, they are unlikely to develop lung cancer, and even though there was an eight-person committee organizing the charity dance, it was primarily their own catalytic efforts that pulled in record donations. Those conclusions reflect a positive bias toward ourselves that can be motivating as well as self-protective.

Strategic optimists tend to indulge in these positive illusions, and defensive pessimists don’t— with important consequences for their self-concepts and relationships with others. Bill, for instance, assumes that when his client rejects his plans for her new townhouse, her decision reflects her bad taste rather than his failure to design something appropriate for her; her evaluation of his work doesn’t lower his self-evaluation— just his opinion of her. But again, both defensive pessimism and strategic optimism involve more than just the presence or absence of these illusions.

## MEASURING DEFENSIVE PESSIMISM AND STRATEGIC OPTIMISM

One of the ways to get a feel for defensive pessimism is to look at how it is measured for research. Below is a modified version of the questionnaire I use to identify people who typically use defensive pessimism and strategic optimism. The questions illustrate some of the ways in which defensive pessimism and strategic optimism are different from some of the other concepts I’ve just reviewed.

In our research, we select participants at the extreme ends of this scale to magnify the contrast between the groups. In reality, of course, most of us are composites of multiple strategies, and the questionnaire assesses only the extent to which someone is *either* a defensive pessimist *or* a strategic optimist in the *particular* situation one is thinking about when rating these statements.

### DEFENSIVE PESSIMISM QUESTIONNAIRE

Think of a situation where you want to do your best. It may be related to work, to your social life, or to any of your goals. When you answer the following questions, please think about how you prepare for that kind of situation. Rate how true each statement is for you.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

*Not at all true of me*                      *Very true of me*

- \_\_\_\_\_ I often start out expecting the worst, even though I will probably do OK.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I worry about how things will turn out.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I carefully consider all possible outcomes.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I often worry that I won’t be able to carry through my intentions.

\_\_\_ I spend lots of time imagining what could go wrong.

\_\_\_ I imagine how I would feel if things went badly.

\_\_\_ I try to picture how I could fix things if something went wrong.

\_\_\_ I'm careful not to become overconfident in these situations.

\_\_\_ I spend a lot of time planning when one of these situations is coming up.

\_\_\_ I imagine how I would feel if things went well.

\_\_\_ In these situations, sometimes I worry more about looking like a fool than doing really well.

\_\_\_ Considering what can go wrong helps me to prepare.

To figure out where you stand, add your scores for all the questions. Possible scores range from 12 to 84, and higher scores indicate a stronger tendency to use defensive pessimism. If you score above 50, you would qualify as a defensive pessimist in my studies. If you score below 30, you would qualify as a strategic optimist.

If you score between 30 and 50, you may use *both* strategies, or *neither* strategy consistently. How you score will be influenced by the kind of situation you were thinking about when you answered the questions, because you may use different strategies in different situations.

We aren't just pessimists or optimists; we are pessimists who are anxious, conscientious, personable, good at math (or perhaps not), with long histories of relationships and experiences with siblings, parents, friends, lovers, and coworkers. We may be pessimists who are pessimistic only about relationships, or pessimistic about everything but relationships. People do not manifest just one or two simple, unrelated characteristics; instead, we have complex personality structures that develop and change with experience. Whether we're pessimistic about the job interview tomorrow depends on whether it's our first or fifth or hundredth, whether previous interviews have gone well or not, whether we've had similar jobs before or are trying to break into a new field, whether we really need the job or are just looking around, whether we're usually anxious meeting new people or comfortable in any situation, and even on whether we're talking about it to our best friend, our children, or the person with whom we're scheduling the interview.

All of this real-life complexity underlies the complexity in terminology that we've just reviewed. Looking (uncharacteristically for me) on the bright side, however, the overlap in terminology is not meaningless, because all of the phenomena described above are related, even if they are not identical. The complexity of our terminology reflects the complexity of real people, and it may remind us that to understand what people are doing and why, we need to avoid thinking of them just in terms of isolated characteristics—as one-dimensional optimists or pessimists.

LOOKING AT PESSIMISM and anxiety provides a perfect illustration of the need to consider the relationship among different aspects of personality. Defensive pessimism would make little sense if we didn't know that the people who use it are anxious and that anxiety creates particular problems for those who experience it. In the next chapter, I'll consider how defensive pessimists face the complexity that anxiety adds to their lives. We'll follow Katherine as she copes with her anxiety and hear Bill's partner, Daniel, describe his struggles, too. The experiences of Katherine and Daniel, and the research that corroborates them, illustrate how defensive pessimism functions as a powerful tool.

# What It's All About The Problem Of Anxiety

The pious pretense that evil does not exist only makes it vague, enormous, and menacing.  
—ALEISTER CROWLEY

Denial ain't just a river in Egypt.  
—MARK TWAIN

## WHY DOES ANXIETY INTERFERE?

The kind of anxiety that Katherine feels is not unusual; lots of people are anxious in similar situations. Indeed, lots of people are anxious lots of the time. Even people who don't think of themselves as "anxious types" have usually felt some anxiety at some point in their lives. (Remember adolescence?)

Anxiety is no fun, and it can get in the way of our efforts to reach our goals. It impairs our cognitive performance because it makes it hard to concentrate on a task—or indeed, on anything except ourselves and our subjective state. Anxiety can make us forget what we've learned, lose the thread of a conversation, or miss key pieces of information that we need to understand a situation.

Like its cousin, fear, anxiety can manifest itself in physical symptoms (increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, sweating, and shaking), which are often apparent to ourselves and everyone watching us. Chronic anxiety over long periods of time can impair immune system functioning and otherwise damage our health and shrink our capacity for normal lives. Phobia is an extreme form of anxiety that leads us to avoid the situations that arouse it; panic attacks in the face of anxiety make some people flee regardless of the cost. Claustrophobics, for instance, who fear confined spaces, may even injure themselves in their desperate attempts to escape from tight spaces when they panicked. And agoraphobics, who fear open spaces, may become prisoners in their homes, afraid even to venture out to pick up the newspaper at the foot of the driveway.

Yet anxiety, like other negative emotions, does serve a purpose. The increased physiological arousal involved in anxiety and fear may facilitate adaptive "flight or fight" responses in dangerous situations. Some level of arousal is adaptive because it helps us pay attention to cues in the environment—and according to one of the few psychological constructs to have the status of a "law" (the Yerkes-Dodson Law), there is an optimal level of arousal for most tasks. Too little arousal (think of someone sleeping), and performance on almost any task is abysmal. Too much arousal (think of how you feel after that fifth cup of coffee), and performance shows serious declines.

What constitutes too much or too little arousal varies from individual to individual and from task to task. Subjectively, however, we can almost always tell when we are too aroused, because rather than simply experiencing a physical state of arousal or positive feelings of anticipation and excitement, we experience thoughts and feelings that we call anxiety. The man who's champing at the bit to fly off on

a dream vacation is excited, not anxious, even though his physiological arousal may be similar to his neighbor's, who, because he is anxious (not excited), wishes desperately for a Valium before his business flight. Usually, we want anxious feelings to go away (though not always— not when we're falling in love, for example); if we can't banish those feelings, we'd at least like to figure out some way to keep our anxiety from interfering with our performance.

## HOW DOES ANXIETY INTERFERE?

How might anxiety interfere with performance? One way (think “fight or flight” again) is when it leads us to run away from whatever is making us anxious. Sometimes that's an appropriate response. Sprinting out of the path of a speeding truck, or a herd of stampeding animals, or a garrulous coworker may be exactly what we need to do. At other times, however, running away is not a very good option. If your predator is faster than you are, for example, you may be better off freezing in place and trying to remain undetected. But staying presents a different challenge: You have to be able to tolerate the feelings of anxiety, which are likely to continue until the predator leaves (or eats you). Tolerating those terrors is tough.

Few of us are faced with situations involving literal predators these days. Still, even when we're faced with a nonlethal threat like a predatory coworker or the prospect of failure, vanquishing the powerful urge to run away when we feel anxious is no easy mandate. Thus, the first problem posed by anxiety is the problem of making ourselves stay in the game; we have to be able to tolerate the tension well enough to remain in whatever situation (or in pursuit of whatever goal) makes us anxious. Wood Allen got it right, at least for anxious people, when he said “80 percent of success in life is just showing up.”

Even if we can tolerate staying, anxiety can still mess up performance. Quavering voices are embarrassing to public speakers and distracting to the audience; the awkward trips and spilled drinks of the socially anxious are at once poignant and off-putting. Sometimes too much physiological arousal can be completely disqualifying: Nobody patronizes dentists who tremble while wielding the drills.

Anxiety produces more than physiological effects. It also disrupts mental performance, and it does so because it interferes with the ability to concentrate. Anxious math students fail not because their hands are shaking so badly that they can't write down their answers but because, when they're supposed to be focusing on the speed of the two trains hurtling down the track, all they can think about is how nervous they are, how much they hate taking math tests, how flunking math will ruin their lives, and how everyone else looks so calm. Likewise, anxious actors fail not because they can't make the required physical gestures but because they're so intent on how much is riding on this role and how humiliating it would be to have to return to Peoria after blowing a shot at Broadway that they can't remember their lines. So, even if we've managed to show up, we still have to figure out a way to shift our attention from our anxious selves and feelings to the task at hand.

Yet another way anxiety can interfere is that it can lead to a kind of tunnel vision psychologists call “premature cognitive narrowing,” which happens when we zoom in on a problem so narrowly that we constrain our repertoire of alternative solutions. Our poor, anxious math student has to guard against the tendency to use only one way of thinking about those pesky story problems, because the same techniques he used to solve problems involving trains heading to Chicago may not work when he has to determine the area of an irregularly shaped object. Premature cognitive narrowing can interfere

with creativity, pacing, and understanding the possibilities in a given situation.

Anxiety has created an impressive set of obstacles for the student to conquer: To get through the test successfully he not only has to sit down and get himself to remember his algebra, but he also must look through a sufficiently wide-angled lens to recognize when he needs algebra, when he needs geometry, and when he needs to finish because everyone else has left and the janitor is about to lock the doors. And all this is after he made himself show up for the exam in the first place.

## **HOW DO DEFENSIVE PESSIMISTS MANAGE ANXIETY?**

Katherine has always been a slightly nervous person. She's always been especially anxious about achievement types of situations—the kind where she has to demonstrate her ability, knowledge, or competence—but she's also always been ambitious and has high standards for herself. She wants to do the kind of professional work that she's doing, which means that she must sometimes face situations that make her anxious.

She has to be able to present her work at professional conferences and to submit papers for review by her peers so that she can obtain grant funding, publish her research, and get more grant funding. She must also perform as a teacher, where her competence is subject to her students' evaluations as well as her own.

Whenever she anticipates one of those situations, Katherine experiences familiar feelings in her stomach, and she's sure everything will end in a debacle. “The journal will never accept this paper. They'll hate my methodology.” Or, referring to her invited address at a national convention, “What if I really blow it?”

That certainly is negative thinking, and it would be destructive thinking if it led Katherine to abandon her paper or not to show up for her invited address. This sort of thinking, however, is just the beginning of her strategy for managing her anxiety.

Because she knows that the top journal to which she wants to submit her research rejects almost 90 percent of all submissions, that her research methodology is controversial, and that peer review can be vicious, she prepares herself for rejection. This, then, is the pessimistic part of defensive pessimism. Katherine has high standards, and she sets low expectations.

It doesn't make her feel particularly cheerful to be pessimistic; after all, she would very much like for the paper to be accepted. But by lowering her expectations, Katherine has taken some of the pressure off herself, which in turn makes her feel somewhat less anxious. Anxiety is fundamentally an anticipatory emotion in that we're nervous about what's going to happen in the future. If we can reduce our feelings of uncertainty about the future by convincing ourselves that we know what will happen—even if our certainty is that things will end badly—we, like Katherine, can reduce anticipation and, thus, our anxiety.

Research shows (and our own experience may confirm) that expected disappointments, while still unpleasant, are easier to bear than unexpected disappointments. If we know what to expect, even if we expect the worst, we feel more in control. Being pessimistic allows Katherine to defuse the emotional power of the outcomes she is worried about, without ignoring or denying that they could happen. Her low expectations serve as a cognitive cushion that protects her, not to the extent that she won't feel bad if the paper isn't accepted, but enough that she can continue to work on it. Since that cushion allows her to go ahead and invest her effort rather than run away from the possibility of failure, her pessimism actually represents the first step in the management of her anxiety: “I know this is going

go badly. Now that I've got that settled, I can go ahead and get to work.”

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## **NOT JUST PESSIMISM**

Defensive pessimism is more than just pessimism. Setting low expectations—thinking that things may turn out badly—kicks off a reflective process of mentally playing through possible outcomes. This mental rehearsal—that obsessiveness of Katherine's to which I referred earlier—is the second component of the strategy. In other words, Katherine doesn't stop thinking after she declares that her paper will never get accepted. That pessimistic prediction just fuels her brainstorming about all the reasons why the paper might not get accepted and the details of how that could happen.

It's the “playing through” or mental rehearsal part of the strategy that leads Katherine's friends and colleagues to label her a worrywart—a name that implies that her worrying is both unnecessary and unproductive. They would be right if all Katherine did was to dither aimlessly and endlessly. But rather than being aimless, this process allows Katherine to dive into the nitty-gritty of what she has to do without being distracted by her anxiety. Mental rehearsal helps Katherine harness her anxiety and transform it into positive motivation.

While trying to work on her paper, she plays through a virtually comprehensive set of possible outcomes. She thinks about how a rival camp of researchers will probably be assigned to review her paper and will try to tear apart her statistical analyses, about how she may have entirely missed a body of literature that would be relevant, which will make her look ignorant, about how her main point is too complex. As she fleshes out these mental scenarios, she decides to have her graduate student double-check the statistics and to ask three of her colleagues to confirm that her literature review is complete and her argument crystal clear.

From the outside, her anguishing may seem like a big waste of energy and time. For someone who's anxious, however, and therefore vulnerable to the problems associated with premature cognitive narrowing, Katherine's kind of brainstorming about negative possibilities is protection against zooming in on only one or two details and squeezing out elements that count more. Minus her defensive pessimism, Katherine might easily bypass the large issue of the overall accessibility of her argument in favor of micro-analyzing her statistics—again.

By the time Katherine has exhausted the range of negative outcomes she can imagine, she's focusing more on the task at hand and less on her anxiety. She's succeeded in managing it so that she can concentrate and work effectively. Defensive pessimism has transformed the diffuse feelings of anxiety escalated by abstract and unelaborated “this-will-be-awful” scenarios into more concrete and less terrifying concerns about what might happen and what can be done to forestall it.

Katherine's mental rehearsal moves from general to specific possibilities, from abstract expectation of negative outcomes to disciplined consideration of how they could come about. From there, she proceeds to define plans for preventing negative outcomes and replacing them with positive ones. Her negative thinking is not passive rumination; it generates a clear and precise blueprint for action. That blueprint makes her feel more in control and, in turn, less vulnerable—at least in this situation—to further disruption by anxiety.

## **NOT JUST PLANNING**

If it isn't obsessiveness or garden-variety worrying, is what Katherine does simply overly elaborate planning? Is the point of defensive pessimism simply that anxious people should plan well? Emphatically, no. That is not the point. Although they should plan well, that prescription for anxiety spectacularly misses the main point that defensive pessimism addresses, which is that anxiety interferes with planful thought. Anxious people can't plan well when they are anxious. They become distracted by irrelevancies and their own emotions, and they forget vital ingredients.

Defensive pessimists are able to use their pessimistic expectations and mental rehearsal to get to the stage where they can do effective planning—and once there, they can then go from plans to action. Without his defensive pessimism, our anxious host would fall victim to his anxiety and end up leaving the salt out of the quiche—even if he remembered to line up all the ingredients on the counter beforehand, in the middle of doing so he might rush off to check the tablecloth in the dryer or to call his date about bringing the wine, and his line-up would be incomplete. His dire imaginings of every potentially disastrous step of the party permit him to focus his thoughts and energies preemptively. As he envisions the distressed faces of guests biting into a tasteless pastry, his anxiety becomes specific and focused, and consequently, so does his planning.

One of the women I interviewed for this book told me a beautifully evocative story about how her anxieties about motherhood had left her unable to organize her thoughts. She had never thought of herself as an anxious person as a teenager or young adult, and her skills at coordinating and planning had been instrumental in getting her a job as an executive assistant at a major law firm—so she was shocked to find herself at such a loss at home. It took awhile, but she found a strategy that allowed her to regain a sense of control and to once again deploy the planning skills she'd had before: She became a defensive pessimist.

After her children were born, she discovered, “No way was I still in control. That illusion vanished forever.” In its stead came an exponential growth in anxiety; suddenly, things that had never mattered before mattered. “An empty fridge, no clean clothes, running late—none of those things used to be a big deal. But now, they all have consequences for the kids. And that doesn't even count the big-time anxiety-makers, like when the kids get sick, or we have to arrange new childcare, or any of a million other things that come up all the time.”

In response to this life transition, she ceased to assume that everything would turn out all right and began to prepare for the worst. Travel with her kids makes her especially anxious; one resultant fantasy has her stranded in a plane on the tarmac for hours, while her two young children are squirming and kicking the seats in front of them, howling with hunger and thirst, and pelting everyone around the plane with inedible peanuts.

As she mentally rehearses these frightening scenarios while preparing for a trip with the kids, she can also imagine what might prevent each disaster; she then methodically makes a list of what she needs to pack. The woman who in the old days spent six weeks in Europe with only a small duffel bag carefully stashes enough food to hold the family overnight in an airport, extra clothes in case of spills or accidents, and half the contents of the toy box and bookshelf, fitting it all into backpacks that leave her hands and her husband's free to hold on to one kid apiece. She is anxious all the while she is packing, but once they are en route, she is able to concentrate on helping the kids to enjoy the trip, no matter what comes.

Before she became a mother, she had felt in control from the beginning of whatever she was doing (traveling, throwing a party, coordinating her bosses' schedules) and had planned naturally and automatically, without giving a thought to how she did it. Now, she has to plan, but she also has to figure out how to plan, when anxiety keeps getting in the way. Feeling anxious and out of control h

made planning hard, and only by rehearsing her nightmare scenarios has she been able to organize her thoughts well enough to plan and act effectively.

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Defensive pessimism isn't different from good planning in terms of the ultimate results. It's different because of its role in getting to those results: Defensive pessimism is the process that allows anxious people to do good planning. They can't plan effectively until they control their anxiety. They have to go through their worst-case scenarios and exhaustive mental rehearsal in order to start the process of planning, carry it through effectively, and then get from planning to doing.



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