

Are things better on the bright side?

A new book suggests most of us are optimists at heart, even if we don't realise it. Is this really the case and does life run more smoothly for those with an upbeat outlook? BY KATHERINE BALDWIN PHOTOGRAPHY NATO WELTON

Do you think every cloud has a silver lining or do you struggle to see beyond the stormy skies? Do you trust that all will go swimmingly or do you always expect a rough ride? Or do you take life as it comes and keep both feet firmly on the ground?

Whatever our outlook, many of us like to define ourselves as optimists or pessimists and we wear our chosen mindset as a badge of honour. Optimists cheerfully proclaim their happy-go-lucky approach and see opportunity and adventure everywhere. Pessimists, meanwhile, take great pride in living 'in the real world'. It seems identifying ourselves as a glass-half-full or a glass-half-empty person gives us a stronger sense of self and helps us to make sense of life's twists and turns.

Psychologists, too, are fascinated by optimism and pessimism, primarily because of the connection between dominant mindset and mental health, well-being and the achievement of life goals. Optimism has been linked to longer life, reduced anxiety, improved health, better relationships and success in sports and careers, while Martin Seligman – credited as the founder of positive psychology and author of *Learned Optimism* (Vintage) – describes depression as extreme pessimism.

Positive bias

But are we as optimistic or as pessimistic as we like to believe? In *The Optimism Bias* (Robinson), psychologist and neuroscientist Tali Sharot argues that human beings may be programmed by evolution

to look at the world through rose-tinted spectacles. We hunted, gathered and explored, overestimating the chances of positive outcomes and underestimating the negatives, and we continue to do so today. Without this bias, the human race would never have evolved.

'If you don't slightly miscalculate and think the reward is higher and the risks are lower, you might not ever get out there,' says Sharot. 'This doesn't mean we don't take measures to protect ourselves – it's not stupidity. We're talking about a miscalculation that works in our benefit.'

Without an optimistic bent we might not travel abroad knowing the risks, or go for another job interview after being turned down. And we probably wouldn't tie the knot – for the first, second or third time – knowing the divorce rate. >>>

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>>> Take Sophie, 40, who always described herself as a pessimist. Her first marriage ended in a difficult divorce after only a few years. At this point, she felt she had a choice. 'I could either become bitter and angry, or I could reflect on my previous experiences and relationships and go forward with an open mind,' she says.

Trust yourself

Sophie began dating again and met Chris, 36, also a divorcee. They clicked straight-away. 'In the early days of the relationship, I did have to force myself to stay optimistic,' she says. 'I had to bat away thoughts of "What if it doesn't work out? What if I get hurt?" But I decided I wasn't going to lead my life waiting for the next thing to go wrong – I decided I was going

to trust this and go with it.' Now married to Chris, Sophie's never felt happier.

This is the kind of 'nuanced' or 'mild' optimism that Sharot says is most beneficial. We are aware of potential downsides and take precautions but we expect the best and this attitude moves us towards our goals. Eleni, 35, for example, is about to take leave from her job to travel the world with her boyfriend. She's aware of the risks but isn't deterred.

'I'm really excited about this trip,' says Eleni, who describes herself as somewhere in between an optimist and a pessimist. 'But I'm not thinking that everything's going to be wine and roses – I'm sure it's not. I know there are going to be a lot of challenges out there.'

According to Seligman, optimists who

meet adversity see it as temporary, specific and external – something that's not entirely their fault and that can be addressed. Pessimists see bad events as unchangeable, pervasive and more personal and are more likely to give up in the face of setbacks.

Self-fulfilling prophecies

Optimists tend to enjoy better relationships than pessimists and suffer less stress and anxiety. They will expect to get a promotion, achieve more, earn more or perform better, and these expectations can be self-fulfilling prophecies. Optimists are persistent and don't give up on their goals.

Tom, 51, believes his innate optimism gave him the drive to return to education and go far in his career despite coming from a poor home and leaving a failing school at 16 with no 'A' levels. Most of his school friends didn't continue learning and some went to prison. 'You get dealt a hand of cards in life,' says Tom. 'I have friends who got dealt a poor hand and spent their time moaning about that hand of cards, whereas I got on with doing the best I could with those cards.'

Tom drew on this same fighting spirit when he was diagnosed with a brain tumour in April 2011. 'When I went into hospital for surgery, I was up for a fight,' he says. 'In my mind, it was like I was going into a boxing ring. I've got two young children and I was going to do everything I could to come out alive.'

But it would be simplistic to view optimism as good and pessimism as bad. It was collective and irrational optimism that led to the current financial crisis; many Americans were swept along by the contagious optimism of Barack Obama's 2008 'Yes We Can!' presidential campaign, only to be left disappointed by his performance in office.

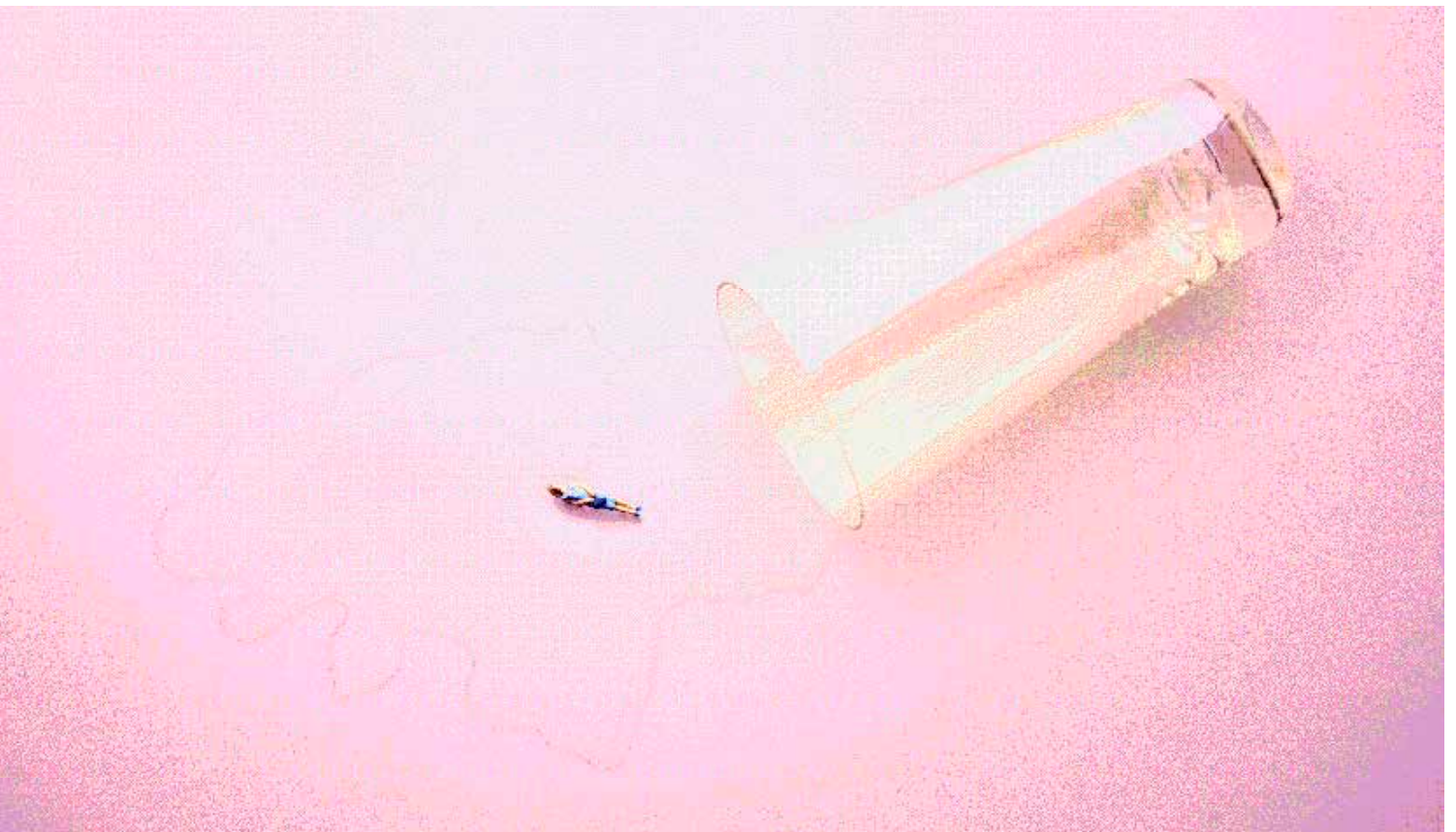
Come over to the sunny side

1 Be rational. Most psychologists agree that rational optimism is more beneficial on balance than pessimism, but given that we all respond differently to life, the key is to be aware of our mindset and to cultivate the ability to be flexible.

2 Take a reality check. 'I encourage people to do a reality check for either type of bias and take a look at the consequences their habitual thinking is having on their lives,' says Kelly McGonigal, a psychologist at Stanford University and author of *The Willpower Instinct* (Avery). So if we always expect the worst but the worst never happens, we can start challenging those thoughts. And if we

continually get disappointed, we can try to practise more realism. The secret is to be aware of the filter we view the world through.

3 Understand yourself. 'Are you someone who works best when you feel confident and eager to go for it? If so, optimism is going to get your motivational juices flowing,' says social psychologist Heidi Grant Halvorson, author of *Succeed: How We Can Reach Our Goals* (Hudson). 'If, on the other hand, you are uncomfortable with too much optimism – you feel like it leads you to be reckless and let down your guard – then a little pessimism might be the best way to stay motivated.'



«Considering possible negative outcomes makes me **better prepared**»

Typically, naïve optimists will ignore warning signals and plough on regardless. Studies have shown optimists cope worse than negative thinkers when faced with severe stress or extreme demands. Optimists may try to solve a problem past the point when their efforts will make any difference. In *59 Seconds: Think A Little, Change A Lot* (Macmillan), psychologist Richard Wiseman describes how optimists are less able to cope when they encounter problems when attempting to achieve a goal.

And psychologists say optimism is not the best policy in the face of long-term stress, such as caring for an elderly relative, or when we're in an unhealthy relationship. Idealising the future can lead to destructive behaviours in the present or stop us from taking necessary action.

Extreme pessimism, on the other hand, can lead to depression but some negative thinking is good for some of us. 'There is a great deal of experimental evidence demonstrating the benefits of mild, temporary, negative mood states,' says Joe Forgas, a social psychologist at the University of New South Wales.

Good outcomes

'We have found that people in a mild negative mood are better at focusing on their environment, report better eyewitness memories, are less prone to various judgemental errors, are better at detecting deception and are even better at performing strategic communication tasks.'

Psychologist Julie Norem, author of *The Positive Power Of Negative Thinking* (Basic Books), has done a lot of research

into the benefits of an approach known as defensive pessimism, particularly when it comes to managing anxiety. 'Defensive pessimists set low expectations and think through possible negative outcomes in concrete detail,' says Norem. This helps them to shift their attention from their feelings of anxiety to specific action – it gets them working towards good outcomes, rather than just fretting.'

Defensive pessimists over-prepare for exams or interviews, have perfectionist tendencies and do thorough risk assessments in business. They are generally successful. Natasha, 25, a fashion intern, says she's a perfectionist who sets herself very high standards and often plays over negative scenarios in her head. 'If I have a job interview, I will consider possible negative outcomes, but I think that just makes me better prepared than optimistic people who just hope for a good outcome,' she says.