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Why Positive Thinking Doesn't Work!

If you want your dreams to come true, you've got to accentuate the negative

posted by John Stark, August 27, 2012 [More by this author](#)



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I recently wrote a blog about how the good things in life always come back, like eagles, heirloom tomatoes, Thunderbird convertibles and other bygone treasures.

I can now add another good thing to that list: negative thinking.

It's back in vogue, if you read the news, though in my case it never really went away. And in many ways I'm a better person for it.

Thanks to some recent university studies, I now have proof that seeing the glass half empty may be the best thing for you. Low self-esteem can help too.

This flies in the face — the smiley face, I might add — of our generation's belief that if you think positive thoughts, visualize your goals and continually tell yourself how wonderful and deserving you are, good things will come to you.

What's Wrong With This Picture?

An article in *The New York Times* earlier this month called "The Power of Negative Thinking" cited a study by NYU psychologist Gabrielle Oettingen that challenged the technique of positive visualization. Her findings suggested that visualizing a successful outcome, under certain circumstances, can actually make people less likely to achieve it.

In one instance, according to the *Times*, "She rendered her experimental participants dehydrated, then asked some of them to picture a glass of refreshing water. The water visualizers experienced a marked decline in energy levels, compared to those participants who engaged in negative or neutral fantasies. Imagining their goal seemed to deprive the water-visualizers of their get-up-and-go, as if they'd already achieved their objective."

This makes total sense. A basic technique of visualization is to put up a photograph of something you desire, something you want to will into your life. Well, despite my friend Georgia having a picture of George Clooney as her screen saver for the last 10 years, he still hasn't shown up at her front door. She'd have a better chance of achieving her goal if she proactively booked a trip to Darfur. Visualization is just another word for lazy.

How Negativity Paid My Mortgage

The power of negative thinking really became clear to me a few years ago, when my freelance writing career wasn't paying off. To earn more money, I became a licensed real estate agent in

Boston, specializing in rentals. My quota for a year was 24 apartments.

My job required me to attend weekly motivational meetings with all the agents in the office. I had to listen to CDs and attend seminars designed to boost my self-confidence. I was given a packet of inspirational cards to display on my desk.

But hard as I tried, I couldn't overcome my negative DNA. Whenever I'd take clients to see an apartment, I'd prepare them for the worst, not the best. Rather than hyping a place, I'd soft-pedal it. Often I'd say, "I wouldn't live here." When my clients saw the apartment, it usually wasn't as bad as I had made it out to be. They would praise its good points. I didn't have to.

Soon my cell phone wouldn't stop ringing. The clients I showed apartments would recommend me to their friends. And in real estate, referrals are everything. Everyone wanted to work with the "tell it like it is" rental agent. My negative sales approach quickly paid off in newfound dollars and self-esteem. By the end of the year I had leased more than 60 apartments, breaking office records. Commission checks poured in. I even won Prudential's "Rising Agent of the Year" award.

It's to my benefit that I never opened that box of inspirational cards. A few years ago, researchers at the University of Waterloo in Ontario found that people who go around saying affirmations — like "I deserve good things" or "I am entitled to my share of happiness" — end up feeling worse about themselves. *Time* magazine cited the study in an article entitled "Yes, I Suck: Self-Help Through Negative Thinking." As the weekly observed, "Telling yourself you're lovable is liable to provoke the grouchy internal counterargument that, really, you're not."

Time noted that the study's authors "conclude that unfavorable thoughts about ourselves intrude very easily, especially among those with low self-esteem — so easily and so persistently that even when a positive alternative is presented, it just underlines how awful we believe we are."

Why Winners Are Often Losers

And yet we live in a society where people are continually encouraged to proclaim just how wonderful and special they are. Just watch any reality competition show. Contestants, no matter how mediocre their talents, boldly proclaim that they deserve to win because they are the best. When a competitor is cut, chopped or voted off the show, they leave looking as if they're about to go home and commit hari kari.

My German grandmother used to tell me to be happy with what you've got. I've heard variations of that sentiment from other elderly people, including my mother in her later years. It's called wisdom. I now realize they weren't saying don't go for the gold. They were using negativity as a coping device. If you don't expect much in life, then everything you get is a gift. If you think you deserve only the best, chances are your life will be filled with disappointments.

The New York Times article put it another way: "A positive thinker can never relax, lest an awareness of sadness or failure creep in. And telling yourself that everything must work out is poor preparation for those times when they don't. You can try, if you insist, to follow the famous self-help advice to eliminate the word 'failure' from your vocabulary — but then you'll just have an inadequate vocabulary when failure strikes."

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Doom and Gloom the Greek Way!

In her book *The Positive Power of Negative Thinking*, Wellesley College psychology professor Julie K. Norem, Ph.D., praises a concept she calls "defensive pessimism." It's where you imagine the worst-case scenario of any situation. "Defensive pessimism is an effective strategy for managing anxiety," she says.

Even the ancient Greeks practiced it, though under another name. According to the *Times* article, "The Stoics recommended 'the premeditation of evils,' or deliberately visualizing the worst-case scenario. This tends to reduce anxiety about the future: when you soberly picture how badly things could go in reality, you usually conclude that you could cope."

This, too, comes naturally to me. Whenever I book a trip, for example, I figure the plane is going to crash. I know that the odds of that happening are minuscule, but my mind doesn't think rationally

when it comes to a 400-ton object's ability to fly through the air without wires. I'm not being a drama queen when I imagine my gloomy scenario; I'm just calming my nerves. Bad news usually comes without warning, out of the blue. If I think up the worst thing that can go wrong, it won't happen because it's not unexpected. I can deal with some turbulence.

And if I fail to compliment you on something, don't get angry with me. It's for your own good. A paper published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* back in 1994 showed that when people get feedback that they believe is overly positive they actually feel worse, not better. The reason: They don't believe it.

Negativity, I'm happy to say, has gotten me where I am today — and that's a positive place.