

# Right or Wrong? Optimism

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**In *Rethinking Positive Thinking: Inside the New Science of Motivation*, Gabriele Oettingen claims that while optimism is important for imagining goals, it can be crippling when people try to reach them. How does Oettingen's position stack up against the positive-thinking preachers of recent decades?**

Oettingen, professor of psychology at New York University and the University of Hamburg, takes a fresh look at the “positive-thinking” movement. Norman Vincent Peale popularized what came to be known as “positive thinking.” The bases for Peale’s ideas are that our thoughts act as causes; that they can change our lives, our health and even our destiny. If someone believes “it,” they can have “it” or be “it” or do “it.”

The echoes of positive thinking can be heard today from preachers like Joel Osteen and T.D. Jakes, as well as motivational speaker Tony Robbins. Their teachings insist the power of the mind, combined with some kind of faith, can change one’s life and one’s world.

## **A counter dynamic**

Oettingen’s careful psychological studies have shown that, rather than helping, positive thinking often inhibits us. Her studies demonstrate fantasizing about happy outcomes—about smoothly attaining your wishes—actually often hinder people from realizing their dreams. Her research indicates dreaming about the future can, in fact, calm you down. However, a counter dynamic also can drain you of the energy you need in order to take action in pursuit of your goals. Positive thinking fools our minds into perceiving we’ve already attained a goal, lessening our readiness to pursue it.

In her book, Oettingen says the solution isn't to do away with dreaming or positive thinking. Rather, a person should practice what she calls "contrasting."

Contrasting is brushing our dreams up against the very thing positive thinking seems to teach we should ignore—obstacles that stand in our way. Oettingen claims contrasting helps a person determine when it makes sense to pursue a wish, but it allows the person to abandon wishes that don't make sense in order to pursue wishes more readily attainable. Her view is positive thinking is pleasurable but not necessarily good for us. What is needed is a balanced approach, neither dwelling on the downsides nor an unrealistic exhilaration.

### **A dangerous enterprise**

From a Christian perspective, positive thinking can be a dangerous enterprise. It can easily deteriorate into mind-over-matter wishful thinking—if I simply believe in something strongly enough, it will happen. Perhaps historian Sydney E. Ahlstrom described this best when he called it faith in faith, which promises peace of mind and confident living in a difficult world.

Positive thinking also can turn Christianity into a self-centered rather than a God-centered enterprise, where God is made into a mere "Force" to be used by the individual to better her/his life. It can quickly forget the core of the Christian message of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, an initiative that comes from God and not from our own efforts.

Christianity does offer hope, even in the midst of the deepest darkness and most trying times. But that hope is best summarized in Paul's assertion in the Epistle to the Colossians: "Christ in you the hope of glory."

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