

Right or Wrong? Positive thinking

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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. The late New York pastor Norman Vincent Peale popularized what came to be known as “positive thinking.” The basis for Peale’s ideas is our thoughts act as causes; they can change our lives, our health, 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 from current preachers like Joel Osteen and T.D. Jakes, as well as motivational speaker Tony Robbins. They contend the power of the mind, combined with some kind of faith, can change one’s life and one’s world.

It fools your mind

Oettingen’s careful psychological studies have shown that rather than helping, positive thinking often inhibits us. Her studies document fantasizing about happy outcomes—about smoothly attaining your wishes—actually often hinders people from realizing their dreams. She discovered dreaming about the future can, in fact, calm you down. However, a counter dynamic can also drain you of the energy you need to take action in pursuit of your goals. Positive thinking fools your mind into perceiving you’ve already attained a goal, lessening your 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." This means brushing our dreams up against the very thing positive thinking seems to teach we should ignore—the obstacles that stand in our way. Oettingen claims contrasting helps a person focus on when pursuing a wish makes sense, but allows a person to abandon wishes that don't make sense in order to pursue wishes that are more readily attainable. According to Oettingen, 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 it 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. It makes God into a mere "Force," which can be used by the individual to better her/his life. It quickly can ignore the core of the Christian message—what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, an initiative that comes from God and not from our own efforts. Christianity offers hope, even in the midst of the deepest darkness and most trying times. But that hope is best summarized in the Apostle Paul's assertion in the Epistle to the Colossians: "Christ in you the hope of glory."

Tim Gilbert, vice president of academic affairs and dean

Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond

Richmond, Va.

If you have a comment about this column or wish to ask a question for a future column, contact Bill Tillman, consulting ethicist for “Right or Wrong?” at btillman150@gmail.com.