

Quintessence of pessimism

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to understand that pessimism is not always appalling. There is always another side of the coin which is largely obscure. The age old definition of optimists and pessimists in psychology is based on the question: ‘Do you see the glass as half full or half empty’? All those who choose half full are termed as ‘Optimists’ or ‘Positive people’ whereas all those who choose the glass as half empty are termed as ‘Pessimist’ or ‘Negative people’. Pessimism is equipollent to optimistic thinking and is conditional to an individual’s perception. This classification might have started with Victorian philosopher William James’s “As if Theory” which states that, it’s our actions that influence our feeling rather than our thinking which may not be applicable on those who are bairn pessimists.

Keywords: *Defensive Pessimism, Strategic Optimism, Superchiasmatic Nuclei, Positive vs Negative Thinking*

“These are two strategies that helps us to overcome the bad situation is strategic optimism and defensive pessimism and two strategies that help us to take advantage of the situation; is realism and opportunism” – Chiru Deva

Theoretically, strategic optimism is correlated with self-confidence, self-esteem, extraversion and positive affect. It can be further perceived as looking at things from a positive point of view or rather positive thinking. Positive thinking is a concept of positive psychology which propagates about realistic thinking that may use pessimistic explanatory style while dealing with challenging situations. Positive thinking uses an optimistic explanatory style which is based upon exact situations.

Positive psychology is a science (subfield of psychology) which is based on the scientific method of evaluating theories on evidence. Martin Seligman (founder of positive psychology) proposed a main focus on ‘life giving’ rather than ‘life depletion’ through his fundamental paper on positive psychology which was published by him in collaboration with founding father of flow, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in 2000. Positive psychology has its own health benefit such as:

1. Longer life span
2. Lower risk of cardio-vascular disease related death
3. Less stress

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Received: May 25, 2020; Revision Received: June 10, 2020; Accepted: June 25, 2020

Quintessence of pessimism

4. Increase physical well-being
5. Lower rate of depression
6. Better psychological health
7. Better stress management and coping skills

However, in 1997, Davidson and Prkachin found out that unrealistic optimism and dispositional optimism are positively correlated with each other which indicate that all optimism is not equally beneficial and may be detrimental along with sporadic pessimism. Life's meaningfulness is comparatively high in worry, stress and anxiety whereas low in happiness and hence, little negative emotion can actually be a good thing if you have a sense of meaning. Focusing on positive emotions alone will not bring the fulfilling and satisfying life (Roy F. Baumeister, 2013). In consonance, it is pertinent to accept the theory proffered by Dan Pinkes in his book 'To sell is Human' that positive fantasies discourage achievements such that 'Will I?' always fare better than 'I Will'. The affirmation may feel good but does not prompt an individual to accomplish the task. As per Sonja Lyubomirsky, Ph.D, strategic optimism or alleviated positive energy causes some social consequences which may lead to rejections in general.

Defensive Pessimism

Defensive pessimism refers to a strategy that anxious individuals (basically introverts) adopts in the form of unrealistically low expectations and devote considerable energy to mentally evaluating possible outcomes for a given situation. It works through the anxiety on achievement of goals rather than experiencing immediate happiness or satisfaction. Defensive pessimism shows significant increase in self esteem and satisfaction specifically for anxious people (Norem 2002a).

The concept of negative thinking or defensive pessimism dates back to the old schools compared to optimism which is comparatively new and closely associated with American school of thoughts. Ancient philosophies and spiritual traditions (from Stoic to Buddhism), suggests that negative thinking, if strategically pursued, has a role to play in happiness. The Greek and Buddhist philosophy of 'Sophrosyne' (Delphic Self Knowledge) and 'Dukha' (Pain/Sorrow) further amplifies the same.

In context of psychology, the concept of obtaining happiness out of negative thinking can be attributed to psychologist Albert Ellis, Ph.D. Who again attributed his discovery to ancient philosophy of Stoic teachings (one of four principal school of philosophy in ancient Athens, alongside Plato's 'Academy', Aristotle's 'Lyceum' and Epicuru's 'Garden').

Defensive pessimists encourage themselves to organize well and try harder. They perform better in a condition of maintaining low expectation or negative outcome of a given task (Norem& Illingworth, in press; Sanna, 1996, 1998). As per Burkemann, negative thinking teaches us to enjoy times of uncertainty, embrace insecurity and constantly learn from failure. Bob Knight, a legendary basketball coach also advocates for looking for the possible negatives in any situation, as it's helpful way to bring about constructive results. He adds that if same one can't think of a thing to worry about then he should worry about being overconfident.

The concept of defensive pessimism is conditional and can be associated with better adaptation to negative life events (especially in old people rather than young ones) (Isaacowitz& Seligman 2001). If given encouragement (boosted with confidence) with

Quintessence of pessimism

quelled anxiety and interfering with their efforts to set low expectations cause performance reduction. Imposing positive thinking on anxious individuals who use defensive pessimism and focus on negative possible outcomes may disable their efforts.

Benefits of being defensive pessimists

Great cultures, especially non-western philosophies have incorporated their worldview elements based on the concept of negative psychology. People think that strategic optimists with the benefit of confidence and high expectations may outperform defensive pessimists. However, the study by Norem and Carter found that the outcome or performance of both of them were comparable. Defensive Pessimism has its own benefit that includes prompting an individual to think carefully, producing better quality and persuasive arguments and improved memory with mental accuracy. Four ways to benefit from the approval of strategic pessimism are:

1. Focusing on worst case scenario rather than the best
2. Get rid of over pursuing the goals
3. Non-attachment to excessive (overwhelming) “Positive thinking”
4. To reconcile with the ultimate negative thinking especially of “Memento Mori” (i.e. every day reminder of death in daily life)

CONCLUSION

The concept of strategic optimism and defensive pessimism depends upon the area of influence and fits where it counts. Optimists tend to thrive in a job that requires resistance and perseverance whereas defensive pessimists perform well while molding the anxiousness and weakness into a selective positivism (anticipate the worst and prepare for the best theory). Extremes of both the form of styles are deadly and need to find a sweet spot or rather a moderate range that combines the benefit of both the approaches. The key to success is rather based on the strategies that have been imbibed based on the individualistic thinking style.

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Quintessence of pessimism

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Acknowledgements

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: K Anup Nair (2020). Quintessence of pessimism. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 8(2), 673-676. DIP:18.01.078/20200802, DOI:10.25215/0802.078