

Are You an Optimist or a Pessimist?

Is either outlook on life better suited to these difficult times? Or maybe both?



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Would you say you are more of a “glass is half-full” or a “glass is half-empty” type of person? That is, are you generally an optimist, someone who tends to see the positive sides of situations, or a pessimist, someone who more often sees the negative?

Is there a place for both kinds of outlook during this current crisis?

In “How to Stay Optimistic When Everything Seems Wrong,” Kristin Wong makes the case for optimism in the face of the challenging present and uncertain future:

With the endless stream of urgent news pushing the boundaries of our mental health, it seems laughable to suggest optimism right now. Maybe you’re worried about losing your job, losing your home or losing a loved one. Maybe you already have. Maybe you’re worried about your own health, and maybe you feel helpless or doomed. Whatever it is, optimism feels like a luxury that few of us can afford.

But at its core, optimism doesn’t require you to sweep those anxious, negative feelings under the rug. It’s not about smiling when you don’t feel like it. Optimism is simply being hopeful about the future, even when the present feels wholly negative. Cognitively, this is a challenge, because it requires you to acknowledge your positive *and* negative emotions at once and to allow them to exist simultaneously. As hard as it may be to make the case for optimism during a time of crisis, that’s when it happens to be the most useful.

“There is an extraordinary level of uncertainty right now, and that produces fear, despair, helplessness and anxiety, which are all understandable and appropriate under these circumstances,” said Stephanie Marston, a psychotherapist and a co-author, with her daughter Ama Marston, of the book “Type R: Transformative Resilience for Thriving in a Turbulent World.”

“Especially during a crisis,” Stephanie Marston said, “we just have to be even more attentive to our emotional state. When we do that, we’re able to more quickly move beyond our stress, discomfort or pain.”

Jennifer Senior makes the argument for “defensive” pessimism in “In Praise of Pessimism.”

Confession: I have a secret talent for making lemons out of lemonade. It may not be readily apparent. I smile a lot and make cheerful conversation; my end of the dinner table is not some horrible event horizon beyond which all sunlight disappears. But tucked inside me, almost always, is a grumbling Eeyore.

That Eeyore is having her moment. The coronavirus is springtime for pessimists. Every gloomy thought I've had about this pandemic has more or less come to pass. So when I read of a possibly more devastating wave of Covid-19 this coming winter, or that recovered patients in South Korea are suddenly becoming reinfected, or that a vaccine might take north of 18 months to develop and mass produce, I merely think *Welcome to my brain*. Those are the lyrics of my personal death-metal soundtrack. They've been playing in my head all along.

In the coming months, all of us are going to have to figure out how to gird ourselves psychologically for whatever the new normal might be. "Optimism tempered by realism," tends to be the favored formulation, and sure, that's fine; it may even be politically and economically sound.

But I'd also like to make a positive case for pessimism. Defensive pessimism, specifically. Because if things start going downhill, defensive pessimists will be the ones with their feet already on the brakes.

And what, you may ask, are defensive pessimists? They are people who lean way into their anxiety, rather than repress it or narcotize it or allow it to petrify them into stone. They busily imagine worst-case outcomes and plan accordingly. This tendency can drive their more optimistic friends and relations bananas — defensive pessimists are destroyers of worlds, harshers of mellows — but it is, for the calamity-howler, a constructive adaptation, far more useful than trying to cheer up. There is no cheering up, as far as defensive pessimists are concerned. They reject what the theoretical psychologist Barbara Held calls "the tyranny of the positive attitude."

"Defensive pessimism is costly in that it doesn't get rid of your anxiety," Julie Norem, a professor of psychology at Wellesley College, told me. "But the flip side is that it keeps your mind anchored and focuses you on things you can control." Which is what distinguishes it from generalized anxiety, garden-variety neuroticism and catastrophizing, by the way. Defensive pessimism is productive.

Students, read ONE or BOTH articles in their entirety, then tell us:

- Are you an optimist or a pessimist?
- Is one outlook on life better suited to these difficult times? Can, or should, you be both?
- What factors and experiences have shaped your outlook and mind-set? If you are an optimist, is it easy for you to look on the bright side of things? If you are more of a pessimist, do you wish you could be more optimistic? Or do you get tired of people telling you to cheer up — what the article labels, "the tyranny of the positive attitude"?
- Which arguments in favor of optimism or pessimism did you find most persuasive and why? Which aspects of either article resonated with your own experiences during the coronavirus crisis?
- What other strategies and tools have you used to maintain your sanity during the pandemic? Which would you recommend to others?

Students 13 and older are invited to comment. All comments are moderated by the Learning Network staff, but please keep in mind that once your comment is accepted, it will be made public.