The Positive Power of Negative Thinking

JULIE K. NOREM, Ph.D.

"Refreshingly contrarian."
—*The Futurist*

Using DEFENSIVE PESSIMISM to Harness Anxiety and Perform at Your Peak

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To my parents, Rosalie H. Norem,
Ken Norem, and Sandy Magnuson;
my husband, Jonathan Cheek;
and my children, Nathan and Haley

Therefore, since the world has still
Much good, but much less good than ill,
And while the sun and moon endure
Luck's a chance, but the trouble's sure
I'd face it as a wise man would
And train for ill and not for good.

—A. E. HOUSEMAN

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Preamble to a Contrarian View

> In all affairs it's a healthy thing now and then to hang a question mark on the things you have long taken for granted.
>
> —BERTRAND RUSSELL

The positive power of *negative* thinking? That proposition sounds almost heretical in American society, bastion of full glasses, silver linings, and the ubiquitous yellow smiley face. Can someone seriously argue that there are benefits to pessimism? That's exactly what I do in this book. *Defensive pessimism* is a strategy that can help anxious people harness their anxiety so that it works for rather than against them.

Defensive pessimists expect the worst and spend lots of time and energy mentally rehearsing, in vivid, daunting de-

tail, exactly how things might go wrong. Before a business presentation, they worry that PowerPoint might fail, that the microphone will go dead, that—worst of all—they will stare out at the audience and go blank. Before a dinner party they imagine that the new neighbors will clash with the old and the sushi will give everyone food poisoning.

Where's the power in this? Don't these negative imaginings leave us whimpering helplessly at the prospect of disaster? Why not be optimistic instead, look on the bright side, think positive thoughts, and give it our best shot? After all, research shows that for many people, optimism is related both to feeling better and trying harder.

Accentuating the positive is not bad advice, but it suffers from the same problem that plagues "one size fits all" clothing: People come in more than one size. Different people face different situations, encounter different obstacles, and have different personalities. Trying to squeeze everyone into an optimistic perspective can be both uncomfortable and unproductive, like struggling to stuff a queen-size body into petite-size pantyhose.

"RELAX—IT'LL ALL WORK OUT" simply isn't always true. We have to *make* things work for ourselves. Trying to adopt a positive outlook when we are anxious—an outlook that discounts our anxiety—can backfire. An anxious business

person who denies or ignores her anxiety before a presentation actually *increases* the likelihood that she'll stutter, fumble, and lose her train of thought before a live audience; an anxious host who doesn't keep in mind the possibility of food poisoning may leave the fish out too long and wind up chauffeuring his guests to the hospital.

Defensive pessimism is a strategy that helps us to work through our anxious thoughts rather than denying them, so that we may achieve our goals. In this book we'll see how anxious people can turn their anxiety into productive motivation that helps them optimize their performance. Defensive pessimism is emphatically not about leading anxious people into depression; quite the contrary—it can actually aid our efforts toward self-discovery and enhance our personal growth.

I BEGAN STUDYING defensive pessimism back in the mid-1980s, when I was in graduate school. Research on the benefits of optimism was very "hot," and looking into the potential advantages of pessimistic perspectives automatically appealed to my contrarian side. Besides, à la *Rashomon,* I'd always been intrigued by the ways that people participating in the same conversation or witnessing the same event could have radically different experiences, which is just how it is with my married friends, Katherine and Bill, whose clashing strategies open the next chapter.

Once I began to look, I found myself surrounded by people who were notably successful, by virtually any definition, and *not* notably optimistic. According to the research on optimism, this shouldn't be. Pessimism should produce negative results. When we set low expectations, we initiate a self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, if we convince ourselves that we'll never pass the test to get our driver's license, we won't spend time studying the manual and practicing how to parallel park. Once we get to the test, we'll have no idea how many feet we're supposed to be behind the car in front of us when it is foggy. Then sure enough, just as we expected, we won't pass the test.

But that discouraging description didn't fit all of the pessimists I saw around me. For example, my mentor at the time, a dynamic and successful woman who personified defensive pessimism (and who coined the term), utterly defied the prevailing wisdom that we have to be relentlessly positive to get ahead. Before every professional event in her life, she would regale me with an impressively impassioned and precise description of the failure and humiliation that awaited her ("So-and-so will be sure to ask about some arcane study that I've never heard of"; "I'll look like a little girl behind that huge lectern, and no one will take me seriously"), but somehow that failure never materialized. Instead, she always passed the test and achieved whatever she pursued; her career trajectory was and is straight up.

There was plenty of research that indicated that people like her should be depressed, sickly, unmotivated, helpless, and hopeless—yet they certainly didn't seem that way to me. The researcher in me was driven to understand these people who apparently contradicted a well-established body of research. Why wasn't their pessimism debilitating? At first, I asked how these people were able to do so well *despite* their pessimism. Before long, however, I began to realize that they were doing so well *because* of their pessimism—and that's when things got really interesting. I began to understand that their pessimism wasn't just pessimism; it was something more. *Defensive* pessimism encompassed an entire process by which negative thinking transformed anxiety into action.

Since then, I have been gathering information about these people to demonstrate how defensive pessimism works as an adaptive strategy when we're anxious. I have run laboratory experiments that allowed me to take apart and tinker with people's strategies to figure out which parts do what and conducted more naturalistic field studies that measured the influence of strategies in real-life situations. I have interviewed dozens of people—both defensive pessimists and those who use other strategies—whose life stories add richness, depth, and complexity to the numbers generated by other research.

Throughout this book I use anecdotes from people I have interviewed (though I don't use their real names), as well as

empirical research (my own and others') and observation to illustrate and animate these strategies. After eighteen years of research—years of testing hypotheses, watching and talking to people, trying to integrate results in numbers with the results from people-watching—I have a surprisingly optimistic story to tell about defensive pessimism. This story illustrates how anxious people crawl out from under their protective covers and face the world and their fears. It stars defensive pessimists, whose personalities reveal why their strategy fits them well and whose progress allows us to see how the strategy works; it features people who have developed alternative strategies, some of which work well and some of which do not.

I'll introduce Katherine and Daniel, defensive pessimists who have built satisfying and successful lives by confronting the dark side. We'll follow them as they anticipate disaster but, paradoxically, produce triumph in both professional and personal situations. Along the way, they'll tell us how learning to manage, rather than banish, their negative emotions has opened the way for ongoing personal growth and development of a clearer sense of who they are and who they can become.

Throughout the book, I'll assess both the costs and the benefits of defensive pessimism by comparing it to other strategies. Bill—who happens to be Katherine's husband and Daniel's business partner—is an optimist, and as we'll see, his

optimism is also a strategy. It contrasts markedly with defensive pessimism and illustrates both the much-heralded benefits *and* the hidden costs of always looking for the silver lining.

Bill's strategic optimism works well for him, just as defensive pessimism works well for Katherine and Daniel. Both of these strategies can be effective, but we'll see that they are far from being easily interchangeable. We can't casually adopt another person's strategy and expect it to work for us, any more than we can put their shoes on and expect to be comfortable. To work, strategies need to fit the people who use them. Indeed, we may find blisters instead of bliss if we aren't careful to equip ourselves properly. Trying on the components of strategic optimism that work for Bill actually amplifies anxiety for Katherine and Daniel; similarly, if Bill tried to become a defensive pessimist, it could *create*, rather than forestall, anxiety for him.

However, some people may find that defensive pessimism fits *better* than their current strategies, if those strategies leave them floundering because of their anxiety. Our cast of characters will also include anxious types whose strategies don't stack up well against defensive pessimism, like Jeff, the avoider, who was the high school whiz kid, full of promise, but who is now confined to lonely, dead-end jobs because he's too afraid to try for more. And many of us will recognize ourselves in Mindy—the self-handicapper who copes with her anxiety by making

sure she always has an excuse ready ("I couldn't find the files"; "I rushed to do it at the last minute"). She protects herself by never laying her best work on the line, but relying on her handicaps is ultimately costly. Her career and her relationships suffer because she cannot confront the world head-on.

For those of us who resemble Jeff and Mindy, defensive pessimism offers an alternative strategy for managing our anxiety and facing our fears. And although Bill's strategic optimism works for him, there are also optimists who have realized that their brand of optimism—especially if it is based on denial of the negative possibilities—isn't working for them. Too many times they have found themselves unprepared and off guard. They don't consider potential delays and are repeatedly late meeting their deadlines; a series of unanticipated disasters has left them shaken and shell-shocked. For each of these groups, learning how and why defensive pessimism works can pave the way for a strategy change that transforms victims into agents. I'll examine when changing strategies is a good idea, how to find a strategy that fits, and how to identify the obstacles to change and the routes to effective change.

I'VE BEEN WRITING this book in my head ever since my first research studies on defensive pessimism were published in psychology journals, but what finally convinced me to commit to actual paper was hearing the same reactions over

and over whenever I talked about the strategy. Many who have never before heard anything positive about their own negative thinking respond with flashes of recognition as I describe defensive pessimism and palpable relief when I argue that it works.

People tell me that they feel vindicated when they learn that there is actually a name for their approach and evidence of its effectiveness. I remember especially the woman who rushed up to me after one talk and said, "I'm so glad my mother and my sisters were here with me! They've always worried so much about the way I am. Now I can just remind them that I'm a defensive pessimist and they don't have to keep trying to change me."

People who aren't defensive pessimists often remark that for the first time they understand what certain of their friends, families, or coworkers are doing, which makes it easier to tolerate. "I always thought I was supposed to try to cheer her up when she went on about things not working out," commented one surprised boyfriend. "But I have to admit that that got old pretty quickly—especially since she never responded very well when I tried. I guess I should just back off and let her work it through her way. I think that will actually be a relief to both of us."

Couples and coworkers who use different strategies also say that they are amazed at how often their disagreements or

conflicts are related to those differences. A trio of nurses smiled as they described their ongoing struggles to cope with each other's strategies: "I'm clearly the defensive pessimist in the group, and they're always ganging up on me when I do all my negative stuff like worrying about whether the doses are right and nagging the doctors about their scrawls on patient charts," said one woman. "Maybe now they'll appreciate having me around more." The other two women laughed, and one remarked, "Well, I don't know about that, but at least now we can see that she's not trying to depress us on purpose." Having names for differences, and having a window on how one another's strategies work, helps to de-escalate conflict. Recognizing the sources of their frictions helps people to respond with humor and even, potentially, to appreciate the merits of others' approaches.

ONE OF THE MOST memorable experiences I've had while studying defensive pessimism occurred several years ago, when the research had just gotten off the ground, and I was a relative newcomer to the field. I was addressing a roomful of senior colleagues—of course everyone was senior to me then. I started by describing the results of several experiments that showed how defensive pessimism actually *helped* those who used it to perform well. Then I expanded on what I saw as the advantages of defensive pessimism—it helps us

confront rather then deny our negative feelings, it transforms anxiety into a facilitating rather than debilitating emotion—and described people whose successes illustrated my points. Finally, and quite daringly, I thought, I critiqued the tendency I saw in the field to assume that positive thinking was always best for everyone.

Relieved defensive pessimists from the audience crowded around the podium at the end of the speech. I spent almost an hour answering questions, being regaled with stories, and eagerly copying down research ideas. After the crush slowly trickled away, I stepped down from the podium to find a well-established senior researcher waiting patiently to talk to me. With avuncular concern, he took me aside and gently explained that I had apparently fallen victim to a common syndrome among young researchers—the tendency to turn the faults of the people or process one is studying into virtues. He went on to assure me that—despite the evidence I'd presented, which had come from carefully designed experiments and been analyzed with appropriate statistical techniques—it was only a fluke that I'd managed to find successful defensive pessimists. Surely, he protested (as his concern transformed into irritation), I couldn't seriously think that there were advantages to pessimism, much less disadvantages to optimism?

In fact, I did think—and continue to think—just that. Lest I be accused of exaggerating its virtues, however, I should