



Rethinking Positive Thinking: Inside the New Science of Motivation

By Gabriele Oettingen

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Gabriele Oettingen draws on more than twenty years of research in the science of human motivation to reveal why the conventional wisdom falls short. The obstacles that we think prevent us from realizing our deepest wishes can actually lead to their fulfillment. Starry-eyed dreaming isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, and as it turns out, dreamers are not often doers.

While optimism can help us alleviate immediate suffering and persevere in challenging times, merely dreaming about the future actually makes people more frustrated and unhappy over the long term and less likely to achieve their goals. In fact, the pleasure we gain from positive fantasies allows us to fulfill our wishes virtually, sapping our energy to perform the hard work of meeting challenges and achieving goals in real life.

Based on her groundbreaking research and large-scale scientific studies, Oettingen introduces a new way to visualize the future, called mental contrasting. It combines focusing on our dreams with visualizing the obstacles that stand in our way. By experiencing our dreams in our minds and facing reality we can address our fears, make concrete plans, and gain energy to take action.

In *Rethinking Positive Thinking*, Oettingen applies mental contrasting to three key areas of personal change—becoming healthier, nurturing personal and

professional relationships, and performing better at work. She introduces readers to the key phases of mental contrasting using a proven four-step process called WOOP—Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan—and offers advice and exercises on how to best apply this method to daily life. Through mental contrasting, people in Oettingen’s studies have become significantly more motivated to quit smoking, lose weight, get better grades, sustain fulfilling relationships, and negotiate more effectively in business situations.

Whether you are unhappy and struggling with serious problems or you just want to improve, discover, and explore new opportunities, this book will deepen your ideas about human motivation and help you boldly chart a new path ahead.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Every day of our lives, our mind diverts into private thoughts—wishful dreams of our future, regrets and ruminations over what went wrong yesterday, nervous anticipation about tomorrow. Gabriele Oettingen’s book is the single best guide to the power and consequence of these private thoughts. It will teach you nothing less than how to think better.”

—**PO BRONSON**, coauthor of *NurtureShock* and *Top Dog*

“How do you get from dreaming to doing? This exciting and important book shows you how to turn your dreams into reality. You’ll be surprised at how thoroughly it overturns conventional wisdom.”

—**CAROL S. DWECK**, Lewis & Virginia Eaton Professor of Psychology, Stanford University, and author of *Mindset*

“Gabriele Oettingen presents a well-written thought-provoking evidence-based self-help book. Hers is an intriguing approach to overcoming life challenges at all ages. It is a worthy read.”

—**JAMES JOSEPH HECKMAN**, Henry Schultz Distinguished Service Professor of Economics at the University of Chicago, Winner of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics

“I was once asked by educators to identify the single most effective intervention for improving self-control. Every scientist I spoke to referred me to the work summarized here—masterfully and with incomparable insight and warmth. Read this brilliant book and then go out and do what Gabriele Oettingen recommends. It will change the way you think about making your dreams come true.”

—**ANGELA DUCKWORTH**, Associate Professor of Psychology, University of Pennsylvania, and 2013 MacArthur Fellow

“Want to quit smoking, lose weight, get better grades, sustain healthier relationships, or negotiate effectively? Then this easy-to-read book, based on twenty-plus years of empirical research, is for you. Setting a goal, visualizing the obstacles, and then charting a path sounds so straightforward—but guess what? It works!”

—**GARY LATHAM**, Secretary of State Professor of Organizational Effectiveness at the Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto

“Gabriele Oettingen, one of the world’s leading experts on the psychology of motivation, presents a forceful, scientifically based challenge to the ‘power of positive thinking.’ This eminently practical book is a much needed and welcome corrective.”

—**LAURENCE STEINBERG**, Distinguished Professor of Psychology, Temple University, and author of *Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence*

“Gabriele Oettingen approaches the subject of positive thinking with a scientist’s passionate curiosity. She is open to anything she might find and truly seeks to discover what works—and what doesn’t. What she found will surprise you, as it did me, and will make you eager to try her methods.”

—**FLORIAN HENCKEL VON DONNERSMARCK**, writer, director (*The Lives of Others; The Tourist*), and winner of the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film

About the Author

Gabriele Oettingen is a professor of psychology at New York University and the University of Hamburg and the author of more than a hundred articles and book chapters on the effects of future thought on cognition, emotion, and behavior. She lives in New York City and in Hamburg, Germany.

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Author's Note

Throughout the book, I draw from the scientific articles and book chapters my colleagues and I have published over the past twenty years. In describing our experiments, our findings, and their implications, I have cited the articles used in the writing of this book so that readers can consult the original texts if they wish. I am deeply cognizant of the rich intellectual contributions of my coauthors, my fellow travelers in the rethinking of positive thinking.

Preface

What is your dearest wish? What dreams do you have for the future? What do you want to be or do? Imagine your dream coming true. How wonderful it would be. How fulfilling.

What holds you back from realizing your wish? What is it in *you* that stops you from really going for it?

Rethinking Positive Thinking is a book about wishes and how to fulfill them. It draws on twenty years of research in the science of motivation. And it presents a single, surprising idea: the obstacles that we think most impede us from realizing our deepest wishes can actually hasten their fulfillment.

Approached by someone who wants to achieve a specific dream, many of us offer simple advice: think positive! Don't dwell on the obstacles, since that will only bring you down; be optimistic, focus on what you want to achieve; imagine a happy future in which you're active and engaged; visualize how much snazzier you'll look when you've lost that twenty pounds, how much happier you'll feel when you've snagged that promotion, how much more attractive your partner will find you when you've quit drinking, how much more successful you'll be when you've started that new business. Channel positive energy and before you know it, all your wishes and goals will come true.

Yet dreamers are not often doers. My research has confirmed that merely dreaming about the future makes people *less* likely to realize their dreams and wishes (as does dwelling on the obstacles in their path). There are multiple reasons why dreaming detached from an awareness of reality doesn't cut it. The pleasurable act of dreaming seems to let us fulfill our wishes in our minds, sapping our energy to perform the hard work of meeting the challenges in real life.

Another way to visualize our future exists, a more complex approach that emerges out of work I've done in the scientific study of human motivation. I call this method "mental contrasting," and it instructs us to dream our dreams but then visualize the personal barriers or impediments that prevent us from achieving these dreams. Perhaps we fear that by bringing our dreams directly up against reality, we'll quash our aspirations—that we'll wind up even more lethargic, unmotivated, and stuck. But that's not what happens. When we perform mental contrasting, we *gain* energy to take action. And when we go on to specify the actions we intend to take as obstacles arise, we energize ourselves even further.

In my studies, people who have applied mental contrasting have become significantly more motivated to quit

cigarettes, lose weight, get better grades, sustain healthier relationships, negotiate more effectively in business situations—you name it. Simply put, by adding a bit of realism to people’s positive imaginings of the future, mental contrasting enables them to become dreamers *and* doers.

Rethinking Positive Thinking presents scientific research suggesting that starry-eyed dreaming isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. The book then examines and documents the power of a deceptively simple task: juxtaposing our dreams with the obstacles that prevent their attainment. I delve into why such mental contrasting works, particularly on the level of our subconscious minds, and introduce the specific planning process that renders it even more effective. In the book’s last two chapters, I apply the method of mental contrasting to three areas of personal change—becoming healthier, nurturing better relationships, and performing better at school and work—and I offer advice on how to get started with this method in your own life. In particular, I present a four-step procedure based on mental contrasting called WOOP—Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan—that is easy to learn, easy to apply to short- and long-term wishes, and that is scientifically shown to help you become more energized and directed.

I’ve written *Rethinking Positive Thinking* for individuals who are stuck and don’t know what to do about it. It’s also for people whose lives are just fine but who might wonder if they could be better. It’s for people who have a particular challenge in front of them that they’ve tried and failed to handle in the past or that they just don’t know how to approach. Ultimately, though, I’ve written it for all of us. We all need help motivating ourselves so that we can stay on track and move ahead.

Why is this? Well, traditional societies have more mechanisms in place—rituals, habits, rules, laws, norms—that circumscribe individual autonomy and assign people roles and responsibilities. The same is true in repressive societies such as North Korea or the former East Germany. When we lack freedom of action, our own choices do not matter so much because external forces push and pull us to act or prevent us from doing so. The challenge people face in these societies primarily involves keeping up their morale and persevering.

Modern Western societies are different, confronting us with what some call the “curse of freedom.” The pull and push of tradition and external authority seems to have subsided. Many of us experience more freedom than ever, but we are now required to act on our own—to find it *in us* to stay motivated, energized, engaged, and connected. Nobody is guiding us, day after day, to do what it takes to stay healthy, to pursue a fulfilling career, or to build a family. Nobody is standing over us giving meaning to our lives. It’s all on our shoulders. We need to keep ourselves on track—and we need to restore our ability to take constructive action when we get painfully stuck.

Indulging in fantasies about the future doesn’t help. Though enjoyable in the short term, fantasies only deplete our efforts and lead us to stumble over and over again. We wind up mired in indecision, on the verge of apathy, prone to an impulsive lurching from action to action, pushed beyond our capabilities, seething with frustration, and falling into an unhappiness we don’t understand. But by experiencing our dreams in our minds *and also* grounding ourselves in the realities we are bound to encounter, we can charge ourselves up to tackle life head-on—to connect with what is most real and abiding in our lives.

Whether you are unhappy and struggling with serious problems, or just want to discover, explore, and optimize hidden possibilities and opportunities, this book will deepen your ideas about human motivation and help you boldly chart a path ahead. Like so many participants in my studies, you’ll come away more motivated than ever to connect with others, engage with the world around you, and take action. All from a single, counterintuitive question: What holds you back from realizing your dreams?

Chapter One

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Dreaming, Not Doing

One of my friends, a man in his early forties whom I'll call Ben, remembers having an intense but rather corny crush on a fellow student when he attended college during the late 1980s. He had seen this woman on several occasions while dining with his friends at a cafeteria on campus. As Ben would shave in the morning or try to pay attention during lectures, his mind would drift and he would picture what it would be like to be in a relationship with this woman. He imagined that she was an artist, and that the two of them would tour architectural ruins in Rome and gaze up at the Sistine Chapel. Maybe she would want to sketch him lying on the quad on a sunny day reading a book, or, better yet, playing jazz piano, as he often did on weekends to earn extra money. Wouldn't it be wonderful to share peaceful moments with someone capable of understanding and sharing his own creativity? For that matter, wouldn't it be wonderful to have a woman to go to the movies with, or to watch a sunset with, or to hop a bus and go to a nearby city with?

Ben didn't tell his friends about his daydreams; he thought of them as his little secret. They were wonderfully satisfying images, but unfortunately, they stayed just that. You see, Ben couldn't bring himself to ask this woman out. He told himself she was a total stranger and he'd make a fool of himself by flirting with her. Besides, he was too busy with schoolwork to date someone. He wanted to get good grades, and it wasn't as if he lacked friends to hang out with on the weekends.

Why didn't Ben have the energy and drive to step up and make his move? He was doing what so many of us regard as essential to success—dreaming about fulfilling our wishes. What was holding him back?

The Cult of Optimism

The notion that simply imagining our deepest wishes coming true will help us attain them is everywhere these days. Best-selling books like *The Secret*¹ and *Chicken Soup for the Soul*² teach us that we can make good things happen just by thinking positively, and that positive thinkers are “healthier, more active, more productive—and held in higher regard by those around them.”³ So many of us do think positively, as illustrated by the unvarnished, smiling optimism of contestants on *American Idol*, who speak confidently of their talents and their dream of being discovered, or their counterparts on the *Bachelor*, many of whom express absolute certainty that they will outshine all the other girls and win the big prize. These individuals gain popularity among audiences not only for having elaborate fantasies about future success, but for living in the bubble of these fantasies and assuming without a sliver of doubt that one day their daydreams will come true.

The cult of optimism goes further than that. Advertising puts forth happy, optimistic people as paragons of success. Politicians at all levels regale the citizenry by claiming the mantle of hope and touting the virtues of the “American dream.” Economists chart “consumer confidence” and survey business leaders about how optimistic their outlook is for the future; financial markets rise and fall on such data. Popular music celebrates the ability of dreaming and dreamers to save the world. We’re also warned from a young age and at every subsequent turn to rid ourselves of harmful “negative self-talk” or to “get out of the hole of negative thinking” if we want to succeed in life.⁴ An inspiring message posted on the wall of a Manhattan middle school exhorts kids to “Reach for the moon; even if you miss, you’ll land among the stars.”

Optimism appears to prevail even in the face of extreme adversity. In 2008, amidst a severe recession, PepsiCo began surveying American consumers as part of its Pepsi Optimism Project. In 2010, a full 94 percent of those surveyed felt that “optimism is important in creating new ideas that can have a positive

impact on the world.” Almost three-quarters of participants reported that they “expect the best to happen in uncertain times.” And over 90 percent said that they “believe that optimism can have a strong impact on moving society forward in a positive direction.”⁵ By 2013, some observers were decrying the death of the American dream and American optimism, yet a survey that year sponsored by the Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company found that 73 percent of Americans saw life as “the glass half full” and 79 percent felt that the American dream was still alive.⁶ Another poll by Gallup found that 69 percent of those surveyed were “optimistic” about their personal prospects in 2013.⁷

The worship of optimism is not of recent vintage, nor is it uniquely American. It’s a theme in world literature, from Marcus Aurelius (“Dwell on the beauty of life”)⁸ to Samuel Johnson (“that the habit of looking on the best side of everything is worth a thousand a-year”)⁹ to Dr. Seuss (“And when things start to happen, don’t worry, don’t stew. Just go right along, you’ll start happening too”).¹⁰ But Americans traditionally have seemed to relish their optimistic outlook. “Pessimism never won any battle,” President Dwight Eisenhower once said. Charlie Chaplin likewise came out on the side of positive thinking, stating that “You’ll never find rainbows if you’re looking down.”¹¹

Belief in the power of optimism rests on a simple idea: by looking at the future, we can hang tough and do our best in the present. And if we are going to look ahead, thinking positively seems to be the way to go. What else are we going to do—dwell on how doomed we are to misfortune and misery? How motivating is that? A common adage circulating on the Web (and printed on T-shirts) says it all: “Dream it. Wish it. Do it.”

Given optimism’s prevalence, it sometimes feels risky to express even mildly negative viewpoints inside institutions and organizations. If you’re in the workplace and you take the position of the “realist,” others will often label you a “Debby downer” or a killjoy. Filmmakers and television producers often shrink from offering tragic themes and sad endings, fearing that they will come across as “too dark” and turn viewers off. For that matter, what politician wants to question the merit of an optimistic outlook or be seen as breaking from the traditional “can-do” attitude?

As a German citizen who came to the United States relatively late in life, I was initially struck by how much more positive thinking was valued in the United States than back in Europe. In Germany, if you asked how someone was doing, you would usually get a frank answer, such as “I didn’t sleep well last night,” or “My puppy got sick and it’s bothering me.” In America, I noticed how people would say, “I’m fine”—even if something was bothering them. I also noticed that people found it jarring when someone violated the unwritten rule of positivity. In 1986, when I was a postdoctoral fellow in Philadelphia, a professor told me about a faculty meeting during which she described some difficult things happening in her life. Her colleagues became highly critical of her for being so “negative” in a professional setting. It was implied that she needed to learn to keep her negativity to herself, so that it wouldn’t infect other people.

A Closer Look at Optimism

As unfamiliar as this widespread optimism was to me, I felt thankful for it and did not see it as a counterproductive presence in society. I felt people were being considerate and not dumping all their problems on one another. They valued being in a good mood and keeping others in a good mood as well. I gained a more nuanced perspective, though, when I began to study optimism during the mid-1980s. Initially, I was inspired by what I had seen in East Germany during the Cold War. I researched cross-cultural differences in levels of depressive behavior and compared pessimistic outlooks between individuals living under communism in East Germany with those who lived in West Germany’s more open, democratic society.¹² As part of this research, I went into bars (or *Kneipen*, as Germans call them) in adjacent areas of East and West Berlin to observe and track signs of depression among male bar patrons.¹³

At the time, some people in West Germany and elsewhere wondered whether the communist system held substantial advantages for people's well-being and sense of security. This was a society in which everyone was meant to be equal and cared for by the state, and in which everybody was guaranteed a job and a place to live. However, I found more visible signs of depression—such as slumped postures and sad facial expressions—in patrons of East German bars than I did in patrons of West German bars. I found it fascinating that many people I spoke to in East Germany, just to get through the day, relied on blind optimism and free imagery of a better future.

On one occasion, an East German painter expressed his chagrin at being trapped in East Berlin. He had no canvas, paints, or other supplies required to pursue his art, and on ideological grounds the authorities explicitly discouraged him from doing what he loved most. But this artist, who painted small, appealing figures in the style of Miró and Klee, also told me of his intense dreams of traveling outside of the country to pursue his artistic work. "One day, I'll visit Paris," he said quietly with a smile on his face. Then he turned to gaze out the window and sighed. It was a poignant moment that brought home just how sustaining positive fantasies can be.

Conversations such as this inspired me to refine my understanding of optimism. Martin E. P. Seligman, founder of the positive psychology movement and my research advisor at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, conceived of optimism as beliefs or expectations about the future that are based on past experiences of success.¹⁴ Seligman found that we are most optimistic when we assess reality as we've known it thus far and logically conclude that the future will likely work out in a similar fashion. If a batter in baseball has already hit .300 with twenty home runs over the past three months of the season, a manager getting ready for a big game will put him in the cleanup position over the player who has hit only .200 with three home runs. Based on experience, the manager believes it more likely that the .300 hitter will get on base in the game—he has a "positive expectation of success."

In East Berlin, though, people I met remained hopeful even though they believed that their wishes for the future very likely *wouldn't* come true. My artist friend had never been to Paris, nor did he have any particular reason based on his past experience to think he would ever visit there. In fact, his past experience suggested he would likely never leave East Germany. Yet still he pictured himself free to pursue his art—painting at all hours, feeling inspired and stimulated and visiting the Louvre. He sustained hope purely on the basis of positive fantasies—free thoughts and images about the future that happened to occur to him and that mentally guided him to and through Paris. His hopefulness amounted to the dreamy anticipation of being surprised given what he knew rationally about his past and the likely grimness of his future reality.

Against this background, Seligman's definition seemed helpful but unable to capture the entire phenomenon of optimism. With his definition the dominant one, many in the discipline seemed to possess an apparent blind spot. Empirical or quantitatively oriented psychologists were hardly writing about or studying positive fantasies or dreams. Influenced by the study of human behavior, they focused on understanding the rational, experience-based judgments people might make about future likelihoods. Expectations were easy to measure and study, while fantasies seemed vague or intangible and thus not suitable for objective analysis. Fantasies also harkened back to Freud,¹⁵ who then (as now) had a reputation for putting forth ideas unsubstantiated by empirical research.

I sensed that positive fantasies were an important part of the human experience, and wanted to explore in depth how they work and affect our behavior. For inspiration, I looked back to the origins of modern psychology—specifically, to the latenineteenth-century thinker William James. In his chapter entitled "The Perception of Reality," in volume two of his seminal work *The Principles of Psychology*, James remarked, "Everyone knows the difference between imagining a thing and believing in its existence, between supposing a proposition and acquiescing in its truth."¹⁶ James was talking about people's outlooks on the past and

present, but this distinction also seemed to hold true for the future. It suggested to me that there were in fact two distinct kinds of optimism worth studying: positive expectations that were based on past experience, and the more free-flowing thoughts and images that were rooted in wishes and desires.

I wondered in particular if positive dreams disconnected from past experience would affect people's willingness and ability to take action in their lives. Scholars like Albert Bandura¹⁷ and Martin E. P. Seligman¹⁸ had probed the connection between positive expectations and performance, establishing that expectations increased effort and actual achievement. In their research studies, people who judged their chances of success more favorably based on past experience actually did more to pursue them and achieved their goals more readily. Would fantasizing about something likewise increase the chances of the fantasies actually coming about? Could a flight of fancy, a dream detached from actual experience in the past, energize someone to take action and accomplish the dream?

I thought it probably could. There was no reason to think dreams were any different in their practical impact than expectations; all forms of positive thinking seemed inherently helpful. Wanting to investigate this further, I conducted a study of twenty-five obese women enrolled in a weight-loss program.¹⁹ Before the program began, I asked participants how much weight they wished to lose and how likely it was that they would succeed. Then I asked each participant to complete several short open-ended scenarios. In some they were asked to imagine having successfully completed the program and in others being in situations in which they were tempted to violate their diets.

“You have just completed Penn’s weight-loss program,” one scenario read. “Tonight you have made plans to go out with an old friend whom you haven’t seen in about a year. As you wait for your friend to arrive, you imagine . . .” In another scenario, I asked participants to imagine that they had come upon a plate of doughnuts. What would they think, feel, or do? Asking participants in the study to rate how positive or negative their fantasies seemed to them, I measured whether they dreamed about an idealized outcome of weight loss as well as whether they fantasized about weight loss being an easy process. It was the participants’ own, subjective assessment of their dreams—whether *they* found their dreams to be positive or negative—which interested me, not whether I as a researcher happened to think their dreams were positive or negative.²⁰

The results of this initial study got my attention. After one year, women who assessed that they were likely to lose weight shed an average of twenty-six pounds more than those who didn’t believe they would lose much weight. But here’s the kicker. Irrespective of their judgments based on past experience, women who had strong positive fantasies about slimming down—the ones who most positively pictured themselves looking slender and attractive when going out with their friend, or who pictured themselves passing by the doughnuts without batting an eye—lost twenty-four pounds *less* than those who pictured themselves more negatively. Dreaming about achieving a goal apparently didn’t help that goal come to fruition. It impeded it from happening. The starry-eyed dreamers in the study were less energized to behave in ways that helped them lose weight.

I published that study back in 1991, and no, it didn’t suddenly cause people either in psychology or the wider world to take a more nuanced look at optimism. It didn’t do much of anything because the prevailing belief in the power of optimism was just too strong. Almost everyone back then accepted without question the notion that positive views of the future would increase the chances of success. For this reason, some of my colleagues urged me to change course. “Stick closer to established concepts,” they told me. “Researching dreams is too risky; it brings you closer to pseudoscience and speculation. If you want people to take you seriously, do research on positive expectations.” But I felt research on dreams was meaningful and that my work could contribute to people’s lives.

Although my first study was published in a peer-reviewed journal, the second paper I wrote on the subject was rejected several times, with reviewers claiming that the results and arguments were too far-fetched. Some of my peers said they didn't even want to finish reading my paper because my message was ridiculous and even hideous. I was upset and disappointed, but I wanted to see my ideas through.

In science, particular findings must be replicated in order for the scientific community—including me as an author—to accept them. You can't necessarily trust the results of just a few studies. Idiosyncrasies in the data or the analysis could be responsible for the findings. To convince my most skeptical colleagues (and myself) as well as attract a wider audience for my work, I wanted to conduct a number of rigorous, larger studies. I knew I couldn't rest on other people's prior work; the burden was on me to build a painstaking case, putting study after study into place like cinder blocks in a wall until the overall findings were supported.

I got to work, spending twenty years observing people of different ages, in different contexts, in both Germany and the United States. I varied my research methods to anticipate any conceivable objection scholars might have. If I could run studies with all these variations and still come up with a similar result, I would feel confident that I was dealing with a substantial psychological phenomenon. That's exactly what happened.

Again and again, much to my surprise at first, the results turned out to be the same. Positive fantasies, wishes, and dreams detached from an assessment of past experience *didn't* translate into motivation to act toward a more energized, engaged life. It translated into the opposite.

Remember Ben, who dreamed about his mystery woman but never pulled himself away from his studies long enough to ask her out? I investigated whether the positive fantasies of people in his situation did in fact impede them from taking action. I recruited 103 college students who had claimed to have a crush on a member of the opposite sex but who weren't dating that person.²¹ I first asked them to assess, on a scale from 0 to 100 percent, how likely it was that they would initiate a relationship with that person (i.e., expectations about the future based on past experiences). Then I asked them to complete a series of hypothetical scenarios related to dating. "You are at a party," one scenario read. "While you are talking to him/her, you see a girl/boy, whom you believe he/she might like, come into the room. As she/he approaches the two of you, you imagine . . ." For each scenario, I asked participants to rate on a 1 (very negative) to 7 (very positive) scale how negative or positive they felt their dream was.

For some students in the sample, such a prompt initiated a positive dream: "The two of us leave the party, everyone watches, especially the other girl. We go outside, sit on a bench, no one around, he puts his arm around me . . . etc. . ." For others, it elicited a more negative dream: "He and she begin to converse about things which I know nothing about. They seem to be much more comfortable with each other than he and I are, and they don't care very much to involve me in the conversation."

Five months later, I checked in on the students and asked if they had gotten together with the person on whom they had a crush. The results were similar to those obtained in the study of the obese women. The more students expected, based on some reasonable assessment of past experiences, that they would initiate a relationship, the more likely they reported having initiated the relationship. But the more students, like Ben, had indulged in positive fantasies as part of our study, the *less* likely they reported initiating the relationship. Initiating a relationship is a classic challenge requiring motivation and bold action. So is looking for a job. Would job seekers increase their chances of finding employment by positively visualizing themselves acing an interview or sitting in a wonderful new office or handing out flashy new business cards? In 1988, I recruited eighty-three male graduate students at a German university. Most were in their midtwenties. I asked how probable it was that they would find a job, and how much it mattered to them that they be employed. I also asked them to generate and write down any positive fantasies about finding a job and to rate on a scale

of 1 (very rarely) to 10 (very often) how often these images entered into their minds. Then I let two years pass before checking back in. The more frequently students had experienced positive fantasies, the *less* success they had. They reported that they sent out fewer applications and received fewer job offers. Ultimately, they reported earning less money. Dreaming about their success hurt them.

Some of the studies mentioned so far—the lovelorn college students, the job seekers—used self-reported data. That is, I assessed the end result by relying on the participants themselves to tell me what happened. What if the participants I was studying got it wrong? What if something about positive fantasies caused them to under- or overreport how much success they were having? That would mess up my results and possibly put my larger findings into question.

I decided to study the phenomenon of positive fantasies in a more objective way, examining the role of optimism in academic achievement. I asked 117 college students in an introductory psychology class what grade they wished to achieve on the midterm, which would happen in two days' time, and how likely they were to achieve it. I measured their fantasies in the usual way—by asking them to complete hypothetical scenarios. “You have already completed your test and today is the day that the grades are posted,” one scenario read. “As you are walking toward the building that the board is in, you imagine . . .” One student completed this scenario with a negative fantasy, writing: “What if I messed up the exam? Maybe I should have studied more—where is my grade? Damn—it is a ‘C.’ How shall I ever make this up?” Others were more positive. I just asked students to rank how positive or negative they thought these fantasies were.

I logged students’ midterm and final grades over a six-week period; I didn’t rely on the students to report them. As expected, the more students positively fantasized about the grades they would get, the lower they scored and the less they reported studying.

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