



News

Sport

Weather

iPlayer

TV

Radio

This website is made by BBC Worldwide. BBC Worldwide is a commercial company that is owned by the BBC (and just the BBC.) No money from the licence fee was used to create this website. Instead this website is supported by advertising outside the UK. The profits we make from it go back to BBC programme-makers to help fund great new BBC programmes



Positive thinking can make you too lazy to meet your goals

Want to succeed? Your optimism might be getting in the way.



By Renuka Rayasam
12 October 2016

About fifteen years ago, when entrepreneur Michael Stausholm started a business with a friend, his partner painted a rosy picture of the future of the business and promised him a lot of success.

Stausholm believed him and felt uplifted, as if saying it would will it to be so. Thinking positive, after all, is a common step to success, right?

“

Just being positive and happy go lucky is not going to work

“Positive thinking is something in the DNA of most entrepreneurs,” says Stausholm, who is based in Copenhagen and who previously worked for shipping company Maersk and then went on to consult for large companies on sustainability issues. “If you don’t think positively, you would never start a business.”

But when the business fell apart, he learned an important lesson. There’s a downside to the power of positivity. “Just being positive and happy go lucky is not going to work — it has to be mixed with realism,” he says.



Michael Stausholm learned the pitfalls of positive thinking the hard way. (Credit: Michael Stausholm)

The power of positive thinking has been a guiding principle for business leaders at least since 1936 when Napoleon Hill published *Think and Grow Rich*. Two decades later Norman Vincent Peale wrote *The Power of Positive Thinking*, which has sold more than 21 million copies worldwide, and more recently Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* has gripped business leaders and others with its promises of success based on positive thinking.

According to these positive-thinking tomes, negative thoughts or doubts stand in the way of success. But, in fact, a new crop of research finds that positive thinking has its limits — and even brings its own pitfalls. Positivity could be limiting your success.

The seductive power of fantasy

Gabriele Oettingen, a professor of psychology at New York University who wrote *Rethinking Positive Thinking: Inside the New Science of Motivation*, says that when she started studying positive thinking, she discovered that energy, measured by blood pressure, drops when people generate happy fantasies about the future like landing a job or earning money.

“The problem is people don't get up their energy to fulfil their wishes,” says Oettingen.



*They fantasise
about it and then
feel already*

Often when people fantasise about achieving their goals they may not exert enough effort to actually achieve them, she says. Oettingen found, for example, that two years after university graduates fantasised about getting a job, they ended up earning less and receiving fewer job offers than those graduates who

accomplished and relax

were more filled with doubt and worry. It turns out they also sent out fewer job applications.

“They fantasise about it and then feel already accomplished and relax,” and lose the motivation it takes to make things happen, she says.

Nimita Shah, the director of the London-based group The Career Psychologist, says people often come in feeling frustrated about not being able to manifest their wishes and then they feel guilty about having negative thoughts, worried that their downbeat thinking is part of the problem.

“It’s similar to having an immediate diet quick fix,” says Shah. Fantasising about the future may help create a short-term boost, but “in the long term it adds to people feeling worse”.

Naturally hardwired

So, should we be worried and thinking the worst is around the corner more of the time? That could be tough. Optimism is embedded in the human psyche, says Tali Sharot, author of *The Optimism Bias* and director of the Affective Brain Lab, a London-based group that studies how emotions affect the brain. She had been trying to study the impact of negative events on emotion when she stumbled across the idea that people are naturally hardwired to think positively. In her initial experiments she asked people to imagine future negative scenarios such as relationship breakups or losing a job.

She found that people would automatically change the negative experience to a positive one — they would say, for example, that they broke up with their partner and found an even better one.





When you see everything as rosy, you might miss something important. (Credit: Alamy)

“It ruined my experiment,” says Sharot, but she realised that people have an inherent bias towards optimism. “They imagine the future to be better than the past,” she says.

That sort of optimism bias, which Sharot calculates exists in 80% of the population regardless of culture or country, helps people get motivated in the first place. Studies also show that optimists live longer and are more likely to be healthier. Positive thoughts, she says, can also become a self-fulfilling prophecy. People who believe they are going to live longer may end up eating healthier and exercising. And ingrained optimism bias also helps people prevail in the face of dire circumstances.

“

Optimism tends to cause people to underestimate risk

But the optimism bias also tends to cause people to underestimate risk. That means for all its upside, we also, say, underestimate the amount of time and money a project will take or how a new pair of shoes will make us happy. In the end, too much optimism is dangerous and can get in your way.

Embracing your inner negative Nelly

But if our natural inclination is to be sunny in our thinking, it will take practice to take on board just enough negative to help offset those optimism blinders.

Using her two decades of research, Oettingen developed a tool called **WOOP**, which stands for wish, outcome, obstacle and plan. The tool, also available as a website and smartphone app, walks people through a series of exercises designed to help them come up with concrete strategies to achieve their short- or long-term goals, mixing positive thinking with attention to any downsides and barriers.

For example, you might want to start a company but then realise you hate to ask people for money or don't want to work long hours. You can then either figure out a way around those obstacles, like teaming up with a sales person or sticking to predefined work hours. Or you might decide that the obstacle is too big and isn't worth it after all — before you've performed poorly.

“Then at least you can put the goal aside without a bad conscience and you can say ‘no, no I've looked it and at the moment it does not fit into my life’,” Oettingen says.



The opposite of positive is not negative — it's having a sense of being realistic

When Stausholm started the sustainable pencil company Sprout a few years ago he took lessons from his earlier business failures. He put all agreements down on paper and made contingency plans for the worst-case scenario.

Now the company sells more than 450,000 pencils a month in 60 countries, results which have surprised even Stausholm.

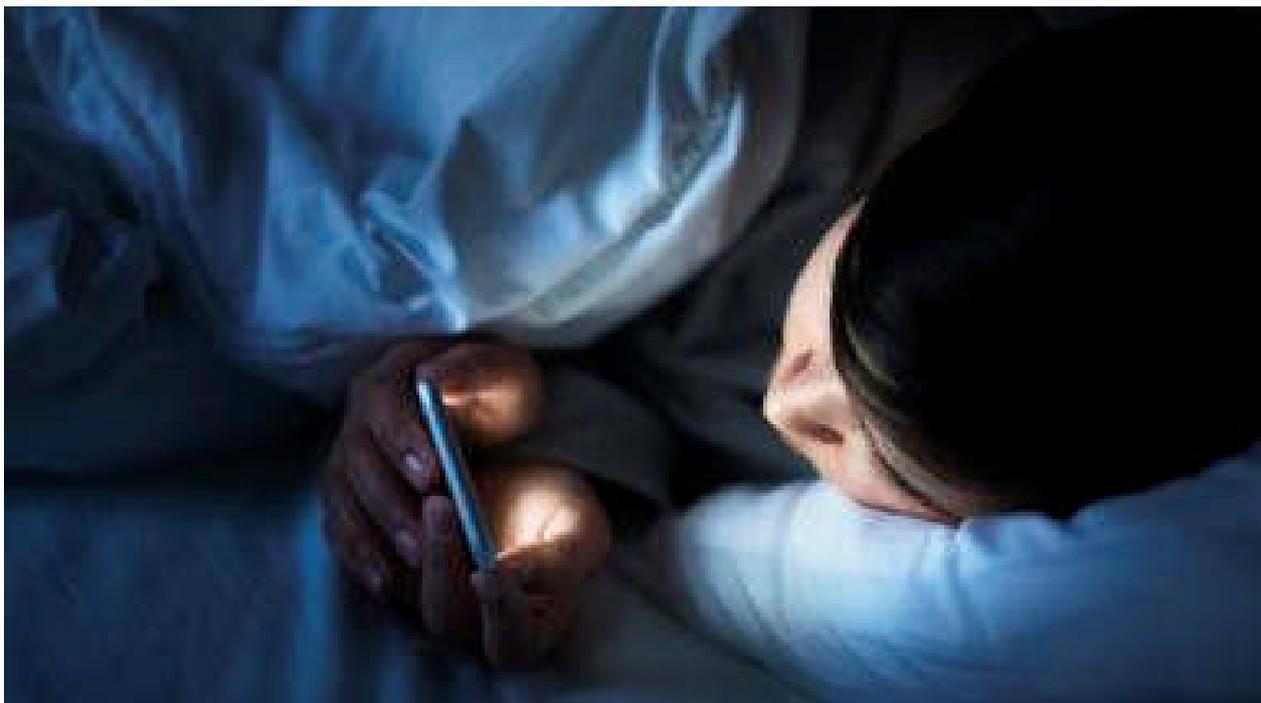
“There is a lot of talk about being positive when being a business owner,” says Stausholm. “But the opposite of positive is not negative — it’s having a sense of being realistic about what you can achieve and accomplish.”

To comment on this story or anything else you have seen on BBC Capital, head over to our [Facebook](#) page or tweet us on [Twitter](#).

Share this article:



Related Stories



Workplace

Always on — and happy about it

‘The fastest way for me to go insane would be to try to work regular hours’

Workplace ▶ Psychology ▶ Careers ▶



Expats

The loneliest country for expats?

Long-term love is tough to find, even in Europe's most single of societies

Expats ▶ **Psychology** ▶



Spending

Why we really hate 'Christmas creep'

Santa in September isn't just odd, it's also doing something to our psyche

Spending ▶ Psychology ▶ Personal Finance ▶

Follow BBC Capital



Facebook



Twitter



LinkedIn

Best of Capital



China

The latest Chinese status symbol

It's not designer handbags or watches — and it's much more important

[China](#) ▶ [Future Thinking](#) ▶ [Expats](#) ▶ [Spending](#) ▶ [Wealth](#) ▶ [Luxury](#) ▶ [Ethics](#) ▶



Life At Work

The man who leads with no limbs

'I have no arms and legs that weigh me down'

[Corporate Responsibility](#) ▶ [Good Business](#) ▶ [Health](#) ▶



Career Coach

Why you should take a year off

This is how to take a sabbatical without ruining your career

[Careers](#) ▶ [Job Search](#) ▶

Careers ▶ Workplace ▶

Executives ▶ Video ▶



Psychology

The hidden psychology of failure

Falling down flat could be the best thing that ever happens to you

Psychology ▶ Leadership ▶

Future Thinking ▶ Life hacks ▶

More amazing Capital stories



Entrepreneur

The woman behind the morning rave craze

Radha Agrawal hated investment banking – so she became an entrepreneur

Entrepreneur ▶ Careers ▶ Health ▶



Expats Guide

A booming city with a brutal history

This South East Asian capital offers expats a 'life-changing experience'

Cambodia ▶ Expats ▶ Careers ▶



Leader Board

Bad news. You've been promoted

The good, the bad and the unexpected of getting to the top

[Managing](#) ▶ [Careers](#) ▶

[Leadership](#) ▶



Expats

The loneliest country for expats?

Long-term love is tough to find, even in Europe's most single of societies

[Expats](#) ▶ [Psychology](#) ▶



Workplace

Always on — and happy about it

'The fastest way for me to go insane would be to try to work regular hours'

[Workplace](#) ▶ [Psychology](#) ▶

[Careers](#) ▶



Workplace

The biohackers who fast for work

This team forgoes food for up to 60 hours at a time in the name of productivity

[Workplace](#) ▶ [Health](#) ▶

[Networking](#) ▶

Around the BBC



Future

Does sex define our personality?



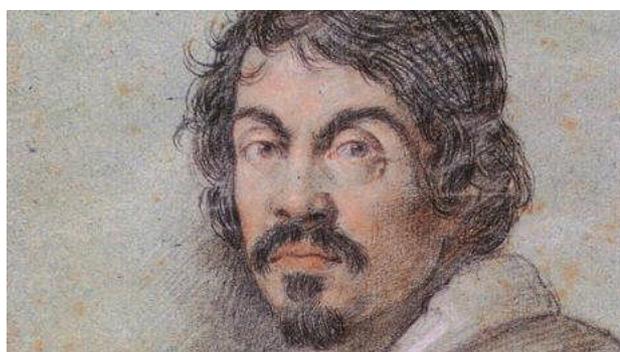
Future

The ultimate ocean explorer



Culture

Why are Canadians so funny?



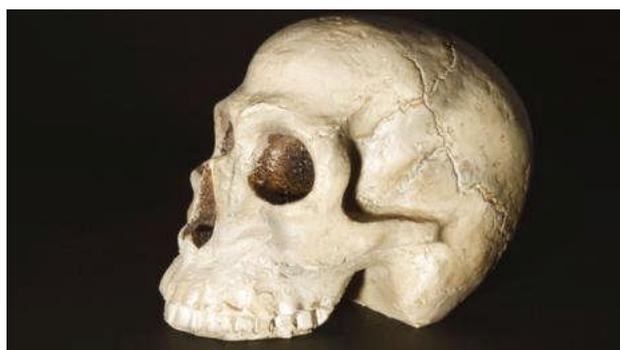
Culture

The artist as shocking as his paintings



Earth

The stones that represent the dead



Earth

The people who ate each other

Explore the BBC

[News](#)

[Weather](#)

[TV](#)

[CBBC](#)

[Food](#)

[Bitesize](#)

[Music](#)

[Arts](#)

[Taster](#)

[Sport](#)

[iPlayer](#)

[Radio](#)

[CBeebies](#)

[iWonder](#)

[Travel](#)

[Earth](#)

[Make It Digital](#)

[Local](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Accessibility Help](#)

[Contact the BBC](#)

[About the BBC](#)

[Cookies](#)

[Parental Guidance](#)

Copyright © 2016 BBC. The BBC is not responsible for the content of external sites. **Read about our approach to external linking.**