



Researchers say a little pessimism may not be a bad thing to weather COVID-19 crisis

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If you're a glass-half-full type who believes brighter days will soon be here, the pandemic could turn out to be worse for you than those who are bracing for catastrophe.

"If things drag on longer and we don't have a vaccine, and life and the economy really go down the tube, it's the optimists who are going to take a bigger hit to their well-being," says Fuschia Sirois, a social and health psychologist at the University of Sheffield. "They're going to have more disappointment and be in a more depressed and negative mood than the pessimists will."

Psychology researchers and those who study optimism say there are both advantages and disadvantages to expecting the best – and to weather this COVID-19 crisis, a little pessimism may not be a bad thing.

People's tendency to be optimistic or pessimistic depends on a variety of factors, including their biological temperament, the information they consume and where in the world they live, says Andrew Ryder, a clinical psychologist and associate professor and director of the culture, health and personality lab at Concordia University.

People have a genetic biological set point in terms of how prone they are to positive or negative emotions, Dr. Ryder says. If you're temperamentally positive, for example, receiving bad news could temporarily put you in a negative mood in which you may imagine a gloomy future. But you'd likely eventually shake it off and return to your set point, he explains.

In this pandemic, however, people aren't necessarily receiving just one piece of bad news, but a steady stream of negative social-media posts, news articles and death statistics that can push them into a negative direction.

“If you get yourself into an emotional funk, then you start imagining a future that is consistent with how you feel,” he says, adding that while you may not be able to do much about your set point, you can control how much negative news you consume.

The collective mood of your neighbourhood and your culture can also influence your outlook, he says. In North America, for instance, people typically believe that when things go well, they will continue to go well. But in other parts of the world, such as China, people tend to hold a cyclical view, anticipating that good times cannot last and there’s bound to be a correction, he explains.

Regardless of whether you’re typically a Pollyanna or a Debbie Downer, during this pandemic you may find yourself simultaneously optimistic and pessimistic about how the crisis affects different facets of your life, says Tali Sharot, a professor of cognitive neuroscience at University College London and author of *The Optimism Bias: Why We’re Wired to Look on the Bright Side*. For instance, you may feel optimistic about your health, but pessimistic about your income. Or you may be optimistic about how the pandemic will affect you personally, but pessimistic about its effect on society at large, she says.

In a study conducted in March and April, Dr. Sharot and her team surveyed 1,145 Americans and found participants believed their own risk of getting COVID-19 was lower than that of their peers, yet, at the same time, they believed the virus posed a significant danger to humanity.

This kind of private optimism could be explained by people’s sense of agency over their own future, which is also tied to greater happiness and less anxiety, Dr. Sharot explained. Meanwhile, public pessimism was associated with greater compliance with public-health measures, such as physical distancing and frequent handwashing. In other words, she says, even though people didn’t feel as though they were in danger themselves, they were largely changing their behaviour to protect others.

One of the benefits of optimism is that it’s linked with high levels of positive mood, and people who are optimistic tend to focus on taking steps to protect their expectations and self-esteem, Dr. Sirois says. But when things don’t turn out well, they can experience a negative downturn in their mood and possibly become more depressed, she explains.

Pessimists, on the other hand, are generally more prone to anxiety, depression and stress, and they can feel helpless. But a certain type of pessimist, called a defensive pessimist, is able to manage anxiety and take precautions against worst-case scenarios, she says.

Defensive pessimists may also have a greater sense of acceptance, and may even feel quite pleased with themselves if things fail to work out, since they never had their hopes up and

prepared for the worst, she adds.

Regardless of whether you're typically an optimist or pessimist, Dr. Sirois suggests that the best way to protect your emotional and mental health through this crisis is to focus on the things you can control.

"We don't know how this thing is going to go," she says, noting that in these types of unpredictable situations, people need a sense of control to feel the world is not entirely chaotic. So whether it's learning a new language or becoming a better baker or gardener while in lockdown, "focus on goals that you can control, and feel optimistic about those goals."

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