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Optimism bias needs a reality check

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Optimism bias also makes people more confident. FILE PHOTO | NNMG

As humans, we persist as a peculiar lot. Heavy clouds grow overhead, life may seem at its worst, friends may desert us, family might laugh at us, but despite everything, humans still see an optimistic lining in the midst of the storm. Optimism keeps humans going.

Optimism fuels us on our persistent quest for education. Certificates, trainings, diplomas, and degrees all serve to quench our thirst for a pathway to an optimistic better future. In our families, parents dream for better futures for their children than the reality that they themselves faced. Economic growth and development serves as the major indicators which countries are judged. Countries are not measured by stagnation but rather improvements. Humans as a species do not stand satisfied with the status quo.

Optimism does not just serve as a flagship of the modern era but rather a constant long-lasting human desire upon which the modern era has been possible. Not satisfied with hunting and gathering, humans dabbled in agriculture until harnessing it. Humans created permanent settlements instead of constantly moving to chase wild game and fruits.

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But unfortunately, optimism not only serves as a human rallying cry, it also serves as a major point of bias.

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Deep down we think we will not develop diabetes, even though we might be obese, because we are optimistically thinking that such affliction happens to other people and not to us. Optimistically, we apply for jobs that are way out of our skill level in hopes that we could be that anomaly that might get the job. As humans, we are not good at seeing the world in terms of probabilities.

In driving around Nairobi or Mombasa today, what proportion of people do we see actually wearing face masks to protect themselves and others from Covid-19? As the days since the coronavirus pandemic reached our shores, adherence to public health safety protocols has reduced, reduced, and reduced further. The longer it goes, we expect others to get infected but surely not us. Then if we do get infected, we expect to be among the majority who skate through unscathed with only mild symptoms.

What would the world look like if humans saw everything in terms of rational probabilities? Researchers claim that far few individuals would pursue master's degree studies because the cost of the programmes on average do not get repaid by commensurate higher salaries over one's lifetime post-degree. People would visit pizza restaurants, ice cream parlours, and nightclubs much less often. We would consume less carbohydrates, less red meat, and more leafy vegetables and white meat proteins. We would not apply for jobs that are too far beyond our skills. We would spend more time listening to our co-workers and learning from our bosses. We would drive slower and be kinder to one another.

Marianna Pogosyan researches human optimism bias. Why do so many people possess the likelihood of optimism bias? Essentially, optimism bias revolves around our expectations for the future. We think the future will invariably be better than it really will or the probabilities suggests. But psychologically, unrealistic optimism bias increases motivation, improves our mental health by hiding from reality, and protects our physical health. So humans developed optimism over thousands of generations as a coping protection mechanism. As long as a society does not

pessimism. Holding to optimism bias not only impacts their expectations for the future, but also makes people feel that they can protect themselves from the future, essentially future proofing themselves. But realistically, someone's attempt to protect themselves from the effects of the future by stockpiling food or taking unproven medical advice and practices in the face of coronavirus or taking part in strange untested physical exercises usually leads to nothing.

Researcher Tali Sharot even highlights how optimism impacts how we gather information. We seek new knowledge, read the news, and talk to friends because of how that information will make us feel. We do not seek information because of what the information actually does or implies. We actively seek out positive news or actions we can take even in the midst of bad news.

Optimism bias also makes people more confident. They think they are the best even if they are not. Surprisingly, such over-confident pro-self optimism bias actually improves our motivation levels even if they are not grounded in facts. We can also receive bad news or conflicting information, but our optimism is flexible and can bounce back.

What do we do about optimism bias? Try to notice your own bias. Maybe you are more optimistic in how you view race relations than reflects reality. Maybe you think your chances of catching Covid-19 are lower than probabilities suggest. We often hold numerous optimism biases. Sit and intentionally think through your expectations versus the realistic probabilities of the future.

Next, understand that the other people in your life, from our spouses and children to our colleagues and our friends all have optimism biases of their own. Do not fear being the voice of reason and probabilities. But realise that reality may dampen their unrealistic hope in the future and that may destabilise them and blame you as the messenger of reality.

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