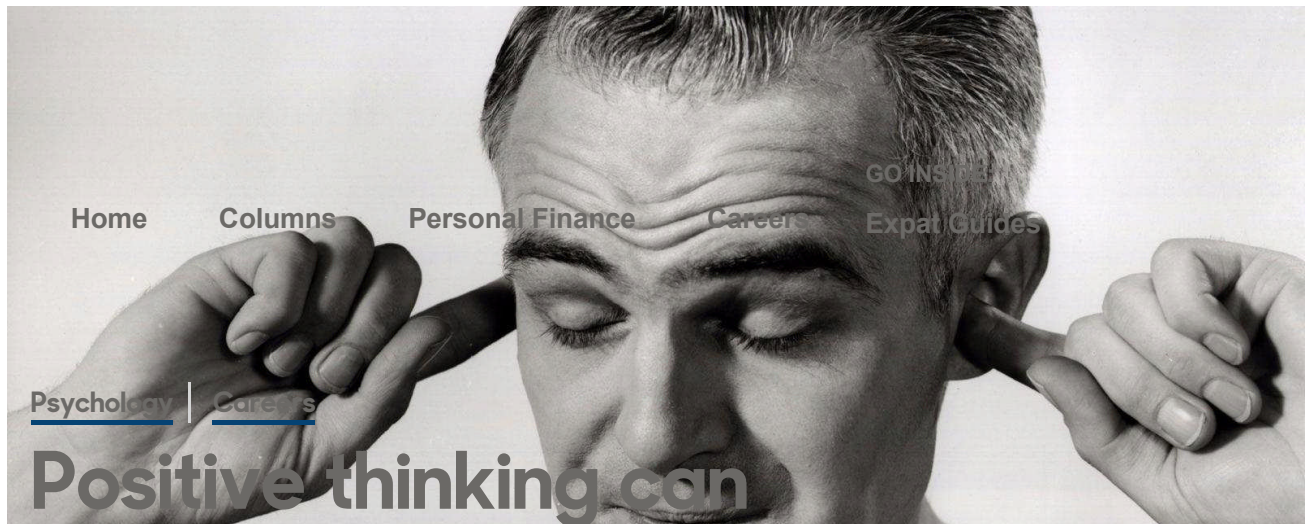


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# Positive thinking can make you too lazy to meet your goals

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

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**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.

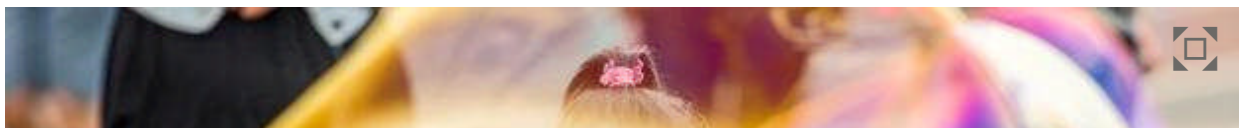
Nimita Shah, the director of the London-based group The Career Psychologist, says people often come in feeling frustrated about not being able to manifest their wishes and then they feel guilty about having negative thoughts, worried that their downbeat thinking is part of the problem.

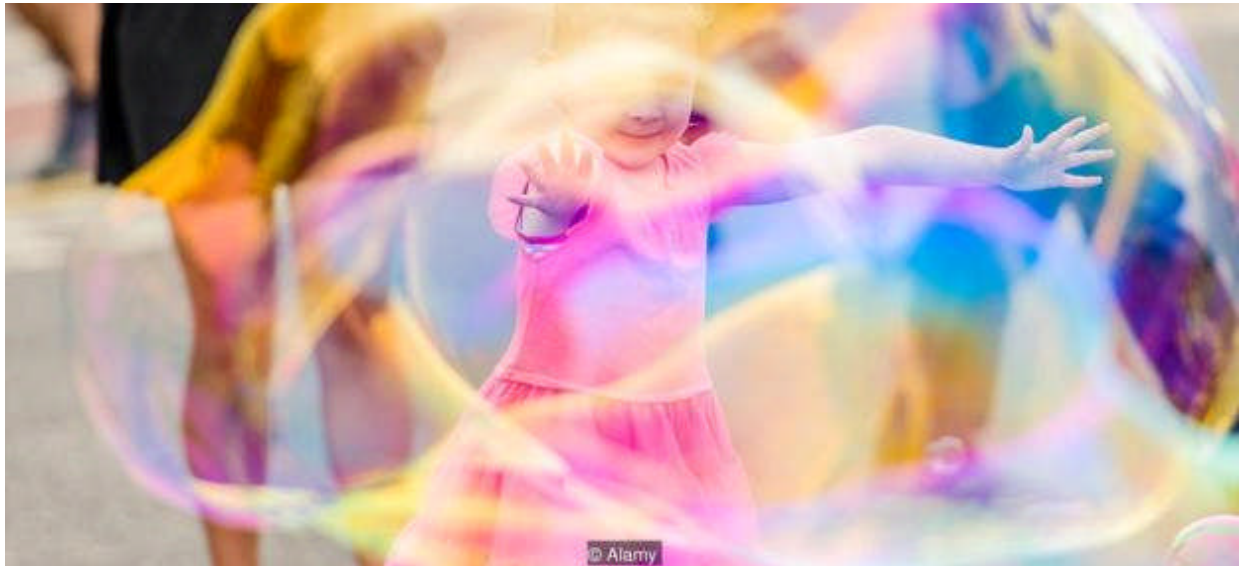
“It’s similar to having an immediate diet quick fix,” says Shah. Fantasising about the future may help create a short-term boost, but “in the long term it adds to people feeling worse”.

### **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.

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*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.

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*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.

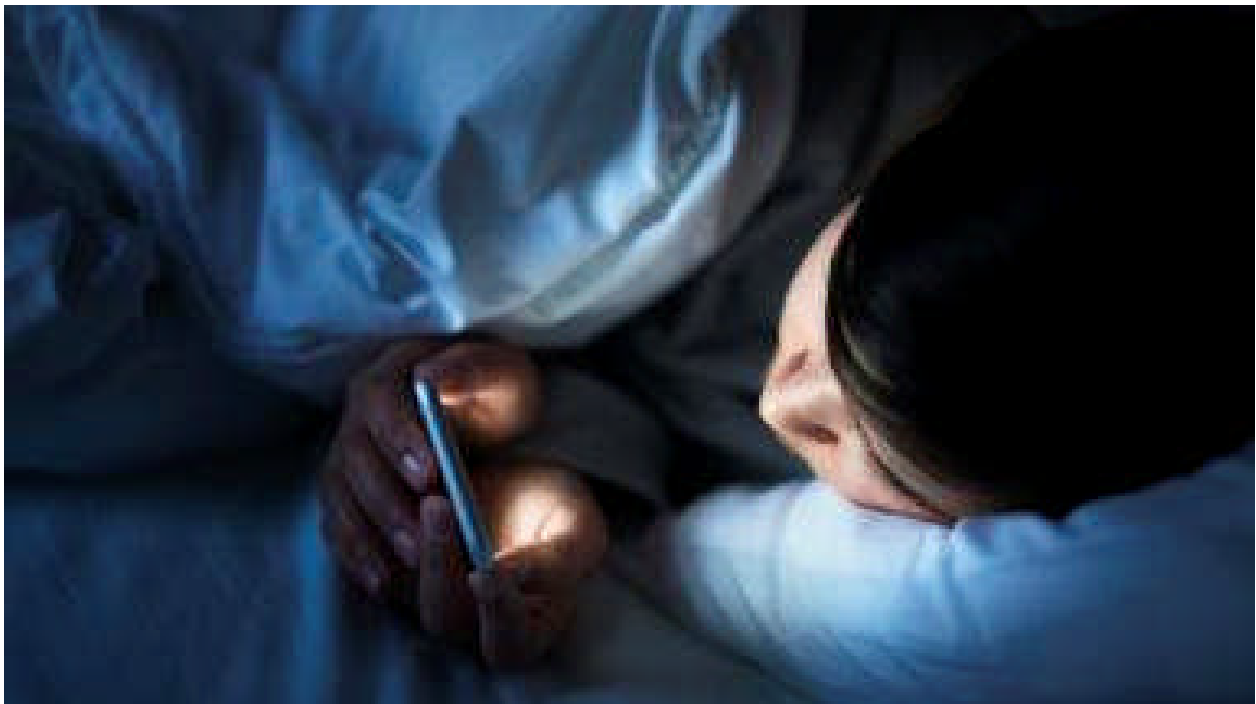
“There is a lot of talk about being positive when being a business owner,” says Stausholm. “But the opposite of positive is not negative — it’s having a sense of being realistic about what you can achieve and accomplish.”

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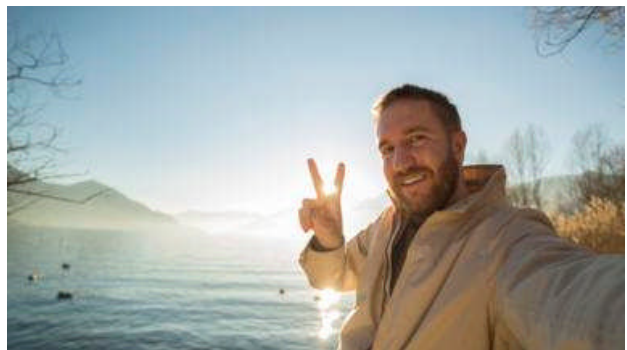


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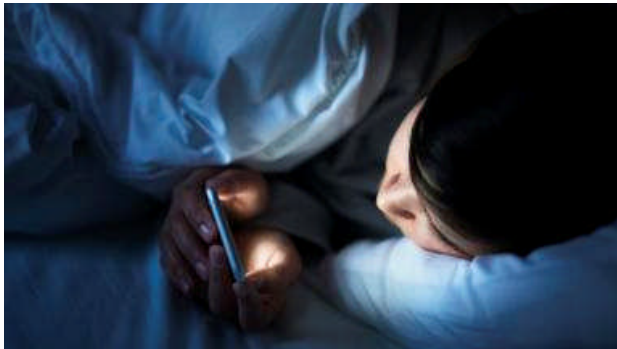
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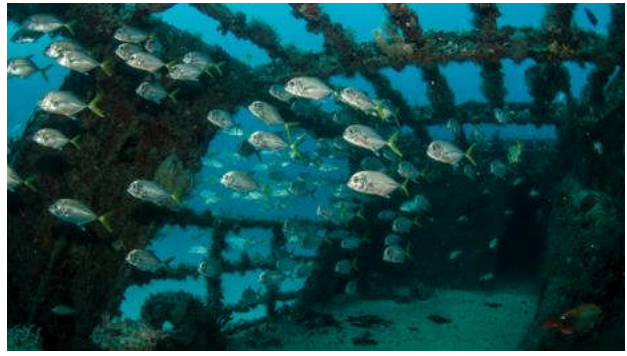
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