The New York Times

THE BRIGHT SIDE

Do You Have to Be an Optimist to Work Toward a Better World?

For professionals in fields such as suicide prevention and climate science, the future can seem bleak. But sometimes action is the most effective form of optimism.

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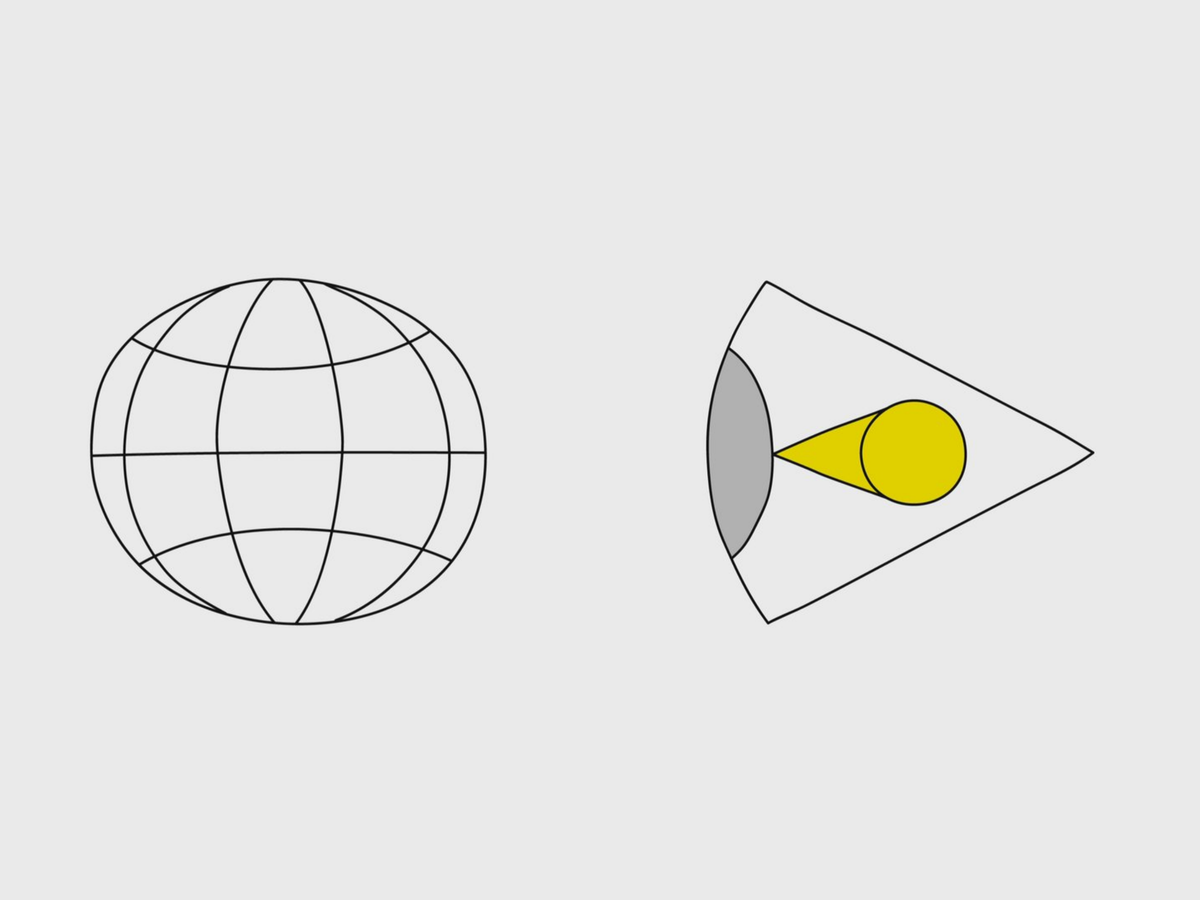


By Igor Bastidas

By Charlie Brinkhurst-Cuff
Feb. 17, 2023

The Bright Side is a series about how optimism works in our minds and affects the world around us.

“I’m afraid that the world is entering a dark age,” said Dr. Igor Galynker, a psychiatrist who specializes in suicide research and intervention. But, he added: “On an individual level, helping people deal with this, and finding ways to live with this or fight this? I’m very optimistic.”

Dr. Galynker’s outlook expresses the paradox for professionals working on the front lines of different crises — whether it’s suicide prevention, climate science, hospice care for children or even imagining a dystopian future in literature — that demand you contend with the worst possible outcomes.

If you are working to make the world better, do you have to be an optimist? Or does pessimism better equip you to address the challenges the future presents?

The ability to cultivate and maintain optimism is believed to originate from a mixture of circumstantial and innate factors, such as cumulative life experiences and heritability. According to Tali Sharot, the author of “The Optimism Bias: A Tour of the Irrationally Positive Brain,” optimism functions as a kind of “cognitive time travel” that allows humans to plan for the future. It is likely that the trait of optimism developed evolutionarily because having “positive expectations” has huge health benefits, and can even lengthen life.

Some professionals, whether they identify as optimists or not, are able to remain motivated to find solutions even when the big picture looks bleak. Often a key to their drive is the belief that, despite a dispiriting forecast, they are making a real difference to the individuals and communities they engage with — which, in turn, fuels a belief in the possibility of a better future overall.

Over the last three decades, Dr. Galynker has personally assessed or treated around 10,000 patients struggling with suicidal ideation. Three of them have ended their lives while in his care. While he is always profoundly affected by these deaths, he said he focuses on helping his patients move out of a crisis state so he can help them address the underlying issues and longer term risk factors that brought them there. Being able to treat his patients successfully makes him incredibly optimistic, even as he worries about the continued rise of suicide rates across the United States.

“I’m pessimistic about the human race,” Dr. Galynker said. “I’m optimistic about individuals.”

For some, a proclivity toward optimism isn't necessary to work toward change. "I wouldn't call myself an optimist at all," said Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, a marine biologist and co-founder of the Urban Ocean Lab, a think tank focused on climate and ocean policy for coastal cities, as well as the author of "What if We Get It Right?: Visions of Climate Futurism." Dr. Johnson explained that she's often characterized as an optimist because of her joyful attitude. "But you can be happy and not assume that everything is going to work out OK in the end," she said. "And I think that's sort of how we keep going, right?"

Raised by parents who were civil rights activists, Dr. Johnson said she had long understood the importance of pragmatically working toward a better future: "To me, it's not a matter of joy or sadness or optimism or pessimism. It's just my moral duty to be a part of the solutions."

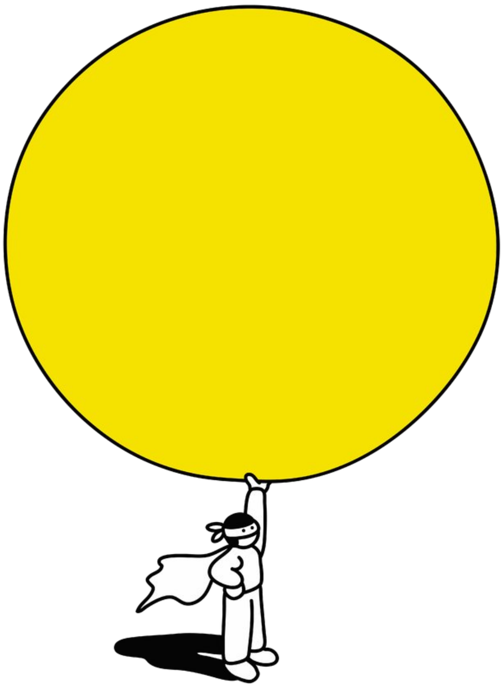
Focusing on the outcomes you can control and the changes that you as an individual can affect can allow you to be optimistic on the micro level, even while being pessimistic about the bigger picture of the future, Dr. Galynker said. Maintaining this sense of personal effectiveness can be key to doing difficult work.

Dr. Hal Siden has worked for more than two decades in what some might consider the least optimistic field imaginable: He is the medical director of Canuck Place, the first children's hospice in North America. But like Dr. Galynker, he has seen optimism pay dividends in his work.

Dr. Siden considers himself a pragmatic optimist who remains conscious of the fact that he moves through the world with relative ease as a white, well-educated man — a privilege that can make it easier to believe that things will work out for the best. He has seen tragedy play out countless times in his role treating children who are terminally ill. And yet, he also sees reasons for hope.

In his time at Canuck Place, Dr. Siden said, the facility's focus has expanded, alongside palliative care, to include more symptom management for long-term illnesses — treatment that doesn't cure young patients but elongates survival. He likened their philosophy to making taffy: "We're stretching out lives." He draws strength from the small ways the center is able to bring relief to people in dark, painful moments, and from the rare cases in which children end up defying the odds. "I just discharged a young man from our program at 18, who I met as a toddler, who came to us from the intensive care unit," he said. "After six weeks there, he was coming over to die." But, with treatment, the boy defied the most dire expectations. “And this is not uncommon,” Dr. Siden said.

Another source of hope is the progress Dr. Siden has witnessed over the course of his career. “I’m watching diseases every day just literally disappear in front of my eyes,” he said.



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Focusing on small victories and achievable goals is essential to resisting pessimism and sustainably working for solutions, said Hamira Kobusingye, a Uganda-based climate activist and educator who runs Climate Justice Africa.

Uganda is one of many countries struggling with the everyday effects of the climate crisis. At the recent COP27 conference, Ms. Kobusingye was able to meet with some of the nation’s leaders to discuss the challenges facing their home country. “Is it a big step or a major win?” she asked, of the meeting. “No, it’s not, but it’s a step forward,” she said. “And as optimists that is what we actually hold on to, and know that one step at a time, we’ll get there.”

Ms. Kobusingye is part of a growing wave of climate activists, academics and TikTok influencers who are challenging “climate doomism.” Rather than letting bleak forecasts drive her to hopelessness and inaction, Ms. Kobusingye cultivates optimism by putting her focus on solutions.

“I am a child of action,” Ms. Kobusingye said. “That’s what my mom always called me.” Growing up in a single-parent household along with her brother, she learned from a young age that, if she wanted a different life, she had to work hard to make it a reality. “I have come from the slums, I have seen nights where we had no food in the house,” she said. She became a self-proclaimed optimist, she said, because “pessimism makes you give up easily.”

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Nnedi Okorafor, a speculative fiction author, knows well how important it is not to succumb to doomism. A naturally upbeat person, she calls herself an “irrational optimist” — aware that she’s living in a “problematic” time, but still mostly inclined toward hope.

Her optimism was cemented when, as a freshman in college, she was left unable to walk after what was supposed to be a relatively routine surgery to treat scoliosis. It was during her recovery period that Ms. Okorafor started writing creatively for the first time. Eventually, thanks to intensive physical therapy, she regained sensation in her legs. “If I hadn’t honed my positivity for many years before that happened, I don’t know if I would have ever walked again,” she said.

More than 20 years later, that positivity is present in the writing that has made her one of the most celebrated speculative fiction writers of her generation, writing stories often set on the African continent. She has worked to infuse her novels with optimism, even in a genre that tends to resist it — the conventional wisdom being that tales of doom and gloom are more marketable.

“In a lot of my more recent stories, I’ve kind of moved away from dystopia,” Ms. Okorafor said, noting that even in her 2010 dystopian novel, “Who Fears Death,” there was hope and joy to be found on the page. “And I’m really obsessed with this idea of the future being positive and utopian.”

“It’s important to imagine a positive future for a positive future to happen,” she said. “If we keep writing only dystopias, that’s the road to the abyss.”

If you are having thoughts of suicide, call or text 988 to reach the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline or go to SpeakingOfSuicide.com/resources for a list of additional resources.

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