

The Case for Pessimism

Anxious, depressed people can spot signs optimists overlook and think outside the box



What American businesses can use at this juncture is the advice of professional nervous wrecks like me. Don't scoff. It pays to pay attention to the Nervous Nellie in the house—the person who will tell you that now is a good time to back away from bravado and consider how an anxious, pessimistic temperament is linked to creativity, conscientiousness, and perfectionism.

One study that confirmed these correlations, "Can Worriers be Winners?" by Adam Perkins and Philip Corr of the University of Wales, found that people of high intelligence who fret, who double-check obsessively, and generally go around in a state of high alarm expecting the worst, produce better results.

As for anxiety, that sidekick of pessimism: There appears to be a genetic tie between mood disorders and problem-solving creativity. When Sir Isaac Newton invented calculus, a new field of mathematics that revolutionized science, he didn't mention his invention to anyone for 10 years. Why? Because he was beset by anxiety and neurosis. And he didn't have a team leader who was paid to be upbeat. (Well, of course he didn't—he lived in the 17th century, a time free of phrases such as "team leader." But you see my point.)

And Sir Isaac wasn't the only angst-ridden scientist. Psychologist Dean Simonton at the University of California's Davis campus found that a third of eminent scientists are dogged by anxiety, depression, or both. In his view, whatever wiring they possess that makes them vulnerable to those feelings also makes them think outside the box.

That goes for business, too. We tend to see pessimism as the bane of robust capitalism. Managers are frequently urged to screen for depression when hiring and to offer their afflicted employees counseling. But within a company's psychological

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capital there exists a currency to be tapped: something known as "depressive realism," the ability bestowed by melancholy to view reality more accurately.

Abraham Lincoln and Sir Winston Churchill, both intimately acquainted with melancholy, brought a sober, gimlet-eyed view to their respective missions, refusing to be carried away by irrational optimism as they searched the shadows for signs of their nations' true states. Would Lincoln and Churchill have been persuasive at today's relentlessly upbeat sales conferences? Probably not. Who wants to hear the ifs and buts?

Well, maybe it's time we did. Studies on "attentional bias" show optimists err by selectively focusing on rewards. They scan the landscape and notice opportunities (and money to be made) but pay scant attention to gathering clouds. People who have endured mild to moderate depressions seem to have a clearer picture of what lies ahead. They take risks when risk is warranted and help develop a Plan B when storms threaten.

FRUIT OF THE GLOOM

Dr. Paul Keedwell at the Institute of Psychiatry in London argues this point in his recent book, *How Sadness Survived: The Evolutionary Basis of Depression*. As far as Keedwell is concerned, depression—and by extension, pessimism—isn't something to be tamped down with medications. Instead, when it strikes, it should be viewed as a necessary dark night of the soul, one that forces us to reassess our ambitions, toughen our resolve, and mature. "Depression," writes Keedwell, helps to remove any misunderstandings, misguided goals, and "false optimism that have fueled goal frustration."

Counterintuitive as that sounds in optimism-besotted America, this view isn't an isolated one. Psychiatrist Jerome Wakefield of New York University, co-author of *The Loss of Sadness: How Psychiatry Transformed Normal Sorrow into Depressive Disorder*, agrees: "[O]ne of the functions of intense negative emotions is to stop our normal functioning," he writes, to make us "focus on something else for a while."

In other words, to make us ask: Are we doing the right thing? Do we have the goalposts aligned? Can Bernard Madoff really make us a million bucks that simply? Or should we hunker down, act like pessimists, and let our dark thoughts lead us to the light? | **BW** |

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