

Insights from Rethinking Positive Thinking by Gabriele Oettingen

“Positive fantasies led to lower energy levels, which in turn predicted lower accomplishment” - Gabriele Oettingen

Gabriele Oettingen has studied the effect of positive visualization for several decades, and she's uncovered some surprising findings:

- College students who visualized themselves receiving a good grade on a psychology 101 midterm received a lower grade than students who didn't participate in the positive visualization exercise.
- College graduates who visualized themselves getting a high paying job received fewer job offers and earned less money than graduates who didn't complete the positive visualization exercise.

When you allow yourself to fantasize about a positive result in the future, you **fool your mind into thinking that you've already achieved that result**. If the mind thinks you've already reached your goal, it won't be motivated to take action towards attaining that goal.

Author Gabriele Oettingen has found that women who participate in a six-minute visualization exercise lower their blood pressure by 3-5 points (mimicking the calming effects of smoking half a cigarette).

"Positive fantasies might make us feel electrified for an instant, but at the very least, this feeling does not correspond to what is going on in our bodies." – Gabriele Oettingen

However, **positive fantasies are helpful if you want to decide which goal to pursue**. By fantasizing you can rapidly simulate several future experiences and select the future that is most worth struggling for. Therefore, you should not scrap the practice of positive thinking.

Here is how you can use positive thinking to envision the future you want and RAISE your motivation to attain that vision:



ish: *"What do I want, and why is it reasonable?" --> allow yourself to see it*

Visualize yourself making progress in one of the following areas of your life: physical health, financial security, key relationships, or the problem you are most concerned with now. Then focus on one action you could take today to move you closer to that vision. Make sure the action is feasible and completely within your control.

Examples: go for a run after work, eat one serving of vegetables with every meal, cook dinner for my partner, etc.



utcome: *"What powerful emotion do I associate with getting it? --> allow yourself to feel it*

Focus on the greatest benefit that will flow from completing your wish today. Allow yourself to feel a peak emotion associated with completion your intended action.

Examples: balanced, proud, relieved, connected, energized, satisfied, etc.



bstacle: *"Why is it going to be hard?" --> see yourself struggling to get it*

Focus on the biggest internal obstacle you need to overcome today to fulfill your wish. If your goal is feasible, then the only thing that can hold you back from achieving is an internal limitation. This means being honest you're yourself and preempting the excuses that you'll come up with during the day to avoid taking action.

Examples: got distracted, too busy, too tired, procrastinated too much, couldn't resist, etc.



lan: *"How do I know I can still do it?" --> see yourself overcoming a struggle to achieve it*

Focus on your response to this obstacle. Consider what has worked in the past, or what you think could work based on advice from a credible resource. Then think: "If I notice the obstacle, then I will...[the action you will take to move past the obstacle]"

Examples: "If I come home tired from work, then I will put on my running shoes and walk outside." OR "If I experience cravings for junk food, then I will go for a walk and drink a large glass of water."

Instead of fantasizing about a future goal, start WOOPing your goals. Start by visualizing what you want, then anticipate what might hold you back, and come up with an if-then plan to neutralize those internal struggles. By WOOPing your goal you'll remain motivated to take action, and be more likely to actually experience your optimistic vision of the future.

“Participants in our studies show important, long-term changes in their behavior—such as eating more vegetables, exercising more, drinking less—after as little as a single WOOP session... It's a living tool that you can use in your everyday life. Practiced daily over an extended period of time, WOOP enables you to not only solve specific problems or wishes, but live a life that is balanced, meaningful, and generally happy.” - Gabriele Oettingen