



Book Bright-Sided

How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America

Barbara Ehrenreich
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Recommendation

What could be wrong with thinking positively? *Nickel and Dimed* best-selling author Barbara Ehrenreich explores the origins of American optimism and reveals the cracks beneath its happy façade. The problem, she explains, is that staying positive regardless of your situation turns into self-delusion. Unchecked optimism can be dangerous, as illustrated by analysts who ignored the economic red flags preceding the financial meltdown of 2008. Ehrenreich’s caustic writing is entertaining, although the threads of her analysis can become frayed and tangled. Nonetheless, if a smiley face makes you frown, *BooksInShort* recommends delving into the negative side of positive thinking.

Take-Aways

- The commitment to “positive thinking” is ingrained in American ideology.
- The early positivity movement was a reaction to the rigid self-denial of Calvinism.
- Today’s positive thinking industry includes megachurch preachers, self-help gurus, life coaches, motivational speakers, plus positivity-pushing psychologists and academics.
- Purveyors of enlightenment use pseudoscience to prove that you’ll attract good things by “visualizing” them, naming them or focusing on them hard enough.
- The positivity movement has a dark side. Penalties for negativity range from losing your job to losing your friends.
- Research does not support any links between positive thinking and the body’s ability to fight off disease.
- Yet, cancer patients are told that a positive attitude promotes healing.
- Businesses use positive thinking to smooth over unpleasant realities like longer hours.
- The positivity culture breeds reluctance to look at corporate or governmental systemic problems, but when positive thinking spreads delusions, disaster follows.
- The antidote to positive thinking is not pessimism but “vigilant realism.”

Summary

America the Positive

“Positive thinking” has always been part of America’s ideology. Most Americans believe things will get better and that when life hands you lemons, you should make lemonade. Yet, US citizens place 23rd in happiness worldwide. More antidepressants are prescribed in the US than in any other country, a higher percentage of US citizens are in jail, and US children score lower in math and geography than kids in other developed nations. The US health care system is dysfunctional and its physical infrastructure deteriorating. The gap between US haves and have-nots continues to widen. Even in hard times, pop culture urges Americans to promote a positive attitude.

“Whether we Americans see it as an embarrassment or a point of pride, being positive – in affect, in mood, in outlook – seems to be engrained in our national character.”

One reason heedless optimism prevails is that positive thinking spawned an industry. Coaches, motivational speakers, psychologists and producers of hundreds of books, DVDs and related products push positive thinking – for a fee. The corporate world embraced this ideology, hiring speakers and sponsoring workshops to

motivate a workforce demoralized by layoffs, longer work hours, less pay and reduced job security. Positivity-driven preachers espouse their doctrines from the pulpit. Schools promote new disciplines like “positive psychology.”

“It’s in the spirit of optimism that a person blithely builds up credit card debt on optional expenditures, takes out a second mortgage or agrees to a mortgage with an interest rate that will escalate over time.”

One unfortunate byproduct of the positivity culture is a reluctance to look at systemic problems in business or government. Positivity blames victims. If you lose your job, it’s because you fell short. Politicians largely ignored engineers and journalists who warned of the vulnerability of the levees in New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina. When positive thinking results in widespread delusion, disaster follows.

Pink Ribbons and Teddy Bears

When investigative journalist Barbara Ehrenreich was diagnosed with breast cancer, she experienced immediate indoctrination into the culture of positive thinking. The mammography waiting room boasted feminine, cutesy images including the pink ribbons that symbolize breast cancer awareness and posters advertising “breast cancer teddy bears.” Ehrenreich delved into websites, blogs, support groups, magazines and books devoted to the disease. She couldn’t find a place – virtual or otherwise – to share her anger, frustration and outrage. Many bloggers shared what they felt were beneficial outcomes from breast cancer. Some even saw it as a “gift” that brought them closer to their true selves or to God; their sample posts include:

- “I enjoy life so much more now and, in a lot of aspects, I am much happier now.”
- “This was the hardest year of my life but also, in many ways, the most rewarding.”
- “Cancer has provided a good kick in the rear to get me started rethinking my life.”
- “Cancer is your passport to the life you were truly meant to live.”

“There is no kind of problem or obstacle for which positive thinking or a positive attitude has not been proposed as a cure.”

Ehrenreich posted an angry message about her treatment’s side effects, her insurance coverage and her aversion to “sappy pink ribbons.” Almost unanimously, respondents encouraged her to embrace a positive attitude. Experts, relatives and medical professionals encourage the belief that an upbeat attitude helps patients heal. Research has never substantiated links between cheerful thoughts and the body’s ability to fight cancer. While a positive attitude can’t hurt, promoting its healing effects means vesting in illusion. That illusion makes patients repress their natural responses and blame themselves should their cancers persist.

Think Positive, Or Else

In 2007, self-help author Joe Vitale addressed a gathering at the annual National Speakers Association conference on “inspired marketing” fueled by love. He told salespeople to “love each name” on their client lists and encouraged Ehrenreich to say “I love you” in her head to heal.

“The failure to think positively can weigh on a cancer patient like a second disease.”

The advice to always be positive has developed a dark side. Penalties for negativity range from losing your job to losing your friends. Motivational speaker J.P. Maroney writes: “Negative people...suck the energy out of positive people...If you have to cut ties with people you’ve known for a long time because they’re actually a negative drain on you, then so be it.”

“Negative thoughts somehow produce negative outcomes, while positive thoughts realize themselves in the form of health, prosperity and success.”

Avoiding negativity extends to what you watch and read. Many positivity counselors discourage clients from watching the news since it might bring them down. This implies an underlying helplessness to effect change and ignores the idea that people can act to fight societal problems.

Faux Science

The idea that thinking about wealth, love or career success attracts wealth, love or career success is not new. The 2006 bestseller *The Secret* popularized this notion, drawing on the work of many like-minded writers such as Jack Canfield, co-editor of the Chicken Soup for the Soul series. Such purveyors of enlightenment promise that you’ll attract good things by “visualizing” them, “naming” them or focusing on them. They base this idea on metaphysical principles more akin to magic than science. *The Secret*’s Bob Doyle likens the “law of attraction” to the law of gravity: “The law of attraction...is a scientific principle...at work in your life.”

“But the economic meltdown should have undone, once and for all, the idea of poverty as a personal shortcoming or dysfunctional state of mind.”

Proselytizers of positive thinking name other scientific principles as proof of thought-power. Michael J. Losier claims that thoughts emit “vibrations” like sound waves; others compare thoughts to magnets. Neither theory survives scientific scrutiny. New Age thinkers cite quantum physics to explain how the mind shapes the physical world. Nobel physicist Murray Gell-Mann debunks such pseudoscience as “quantum flapdoodle.”

American Calvinism

The United States did not begin as a nation of optimists. The early settlers’ harsh Calvinism promoted self-discipline and self-examination while condemning pleasure as sin. Believers often suffered self-loathing that made them ill with “religious melancholy” marked by insomnia, fatigue, depression and withdrawal. Sufferer Mary Baker Eddy, daughter of a Calvinist farmer, sought out Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, a watchmaker who is seen as the founder of the “New Thought” movement. He drew on Emerson’s transcendentalism and other sources to envision God as a forgiving “Spirit” and to posit that “One Mind” connects all humanity. With his help, Mary proclaimed herself cured and founded a new religion, Christian Science,

“The self becomes an antagonist with which one wrestles endlessly, the Calvinist attacking it for sinful inclinations, the positive thinker for ‘negativity’.”

Psychologist William James used New Thought therapies to treat patients. Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* expanded upon Emerson's and James's teachings. The new positive-thinking movement advocates relentless self-monitoring, echoing one aspect of Calvinism.

The Religion of Business

Peale, who called himself "God's salesman," recognized the role positive thinking could play in the workplace. He saw it as a tool for salespeople who need fresh enthusiasm no matter how much rejection they faced. Businesses incorporated positive-thinking techniques into sales training. Amway epitomized this trend, holding sales conferences like revival meetings with chants, theme songs and inspirational speakers.

"With real jobs disappearing, the positive thinkers counseled people to work even harder on themselves – monitoring their thoughts, adjusting their emotions, focusing more intently on their desires."

Business uses positive thinking to get workers to accept longer work hours and less job security. The motivational industry encourages jobless people to view unemployment as an opportunity to embrace positivity. Popular faith-based motivator Zig Ziglar proclaims, "It's your own fault; don't blame the system; don't blame the boss – work harder and pray more."

"Positive thinking seems to be mandatory in the breast cancer world, to the point that unhappiness requires a kind of apology."

More recently, business has focused on team building, promoting camaraderie and shared purpose on a micro-unit level. The goal is to generate continued employee devotion to a company, even though such loyalty is seldom reciprocal. Layoffs and cost-cutting continue; survivors work harder and longer for less money, and no one's job is safe.

The Business of Religion

While CEOs have become more evangelical in their management approach, preachers have become more businesslike. "Pastorpreneurs" conducted market research to determine how to make religion more palatable to a mass audience. The results are megachurches that look like corporate centers and offer services like child care, afterschool programs, counseling and gyms. The pulpit message is based on positive thinking. This tactic replaces threats of judgment or warnings about sin with feel-good messages promising wealth and success. This "prosperity gospel" borrows heavily from secular positive-thinking ideology. Televangelist Joyce Meyer describes the benefits of the right attitude. "It's important to maintain a positive attitude, because God is positive." Or, more directly to the point, "I believe God wants to give us nice things."

"Positive Psychology"

The field of "positive psychology," or the "science of happiness," has exploded in academic circles since the late 1990s. Although positive psychologists do not align with the pop-culture positivity faction, they have produced studies that link happiness with every conceivable benefit, including better health, longevity and career success.

"It's a glorious universe the positive thinkers have come up with, a vast, shimmering aurora borealis in which desires mingle freely with their realizations.

Many, including then-president of the American Psychological Association Martin Seligman, publish self-help books and provide life-coaching and corporate consulting. Seligman uses science to give weight to his happiness theories, such as the "happiness equation," $H = S + C + V$: " H is your enduring level of happiness, S is your set range, C is the circumstances of your life and V represents factors under your voluntary control." That is, temperament, circumstances and personal effort determine your happiness level. His science does not hold up under scrutiny.

"Where cheerfulness is the norm, crankiness can seem perverse."

Many research studies do support the link between happiness and better health, longevity and life satisfaction. However, conflicting research, such as a 2002 study that found that mildly depressed women outlive their happier counterparts, also abounds.

The Silver Lining

Positive thinking's popularity led experts as well as analysts to ignore evidence and remain upbeat in the face of the oncoming 2007-2008 economic crisis. Even during the booming economy some time before the recession, white-collar workers ended up on unemployment lines, while the wages of blue-collar laborers dropped or their jobs vanished all together. The income gap between the rich and most other people grew to unprecedented levels.

"We've gone so far down this yellow brick road that 'positive' seems to us not only normal but normative – the way you should be."

Financial pundits remained optimistic as the real estate bubble inflated, ordinary people took on extraordinary debt and financial institutions offered risky loans. The few financial industry naysayers felt great pressure to "improve their attitude." When Mike Gelband, Global Head of Fixed Income at Lehman Brothers, warned CEO Richard Fuld of the impending real estate collapse, Fuld fired him. And Armando Falcon, head of oversight for mortgage giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, almost lost his job when he spoke of upcoming problems.

Still Cheery After All These Years

The positive thinking movement has not lost any momentum during the economic downturn. Upbeat proponents say that tough times call for more positive thinking, not less. After all, "What is a recession, anyway, but a mass outbreak of pessimism?" The antidote to positive thinking is not pessimism. Thinking the worst of every situation is just as self-delusional as thinking the best. Realism is the truth. Viewing the world objectively – without preconceived notions or emotions – and

understanding that threats and opportunities exist simultaneously is the healthiest path. Science, which explains the world through observation and research, is helpful. Seeking other people's insights is also useful, even when they conflict with your own.

"I realize that after decades of positive thinking the notion of realism, of things as they are, may seem a little quaint."

Thinking positively, despite circumstance, becomes a burden. Sometimes, recognizing threats, heeding bad news or listening to negative people is imperative. "Vigilant realism" and the ability to confront unpleasant circumstances head-on enable genuine happiness. "The threats we face are real and can be vanquished only by shaking off self-absorption and taking action in the world."

About the Author

Barbara Ehrenreich, who wrote *Nickel and Dimed* and *Bait and Switch*, is a *New York Times* columnist and contributing essayist for *Harper's* and *The Nation*.
