



The Positive Power Of Negative Thinking

By Julie Norem

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How often are we urged to "look on the bright side"? From Norman Vincent Peale to the ubiquitous smiley face, optimism has become an essential part of American society. In this long-overdue book, psychologist Julie Norem offers convincing evidence that, for many people, positive thinking is an ineffective strategy-and often an obstacle-for successfully coping with the anxieties and pressures of modern life. "Defensive pessimism," which involves imagining the worst possible outcomes to any action and everything that could go wrong in a given situation, actually helps millions of people manage their anxiety and perform their best work, all the while refusing to succumb to "oblivious optimism." Drawing on her own research and many vivid case histories, Norem shows how to use defensive pessimism and provides evidence and fascinating explanations of its powerful benefits. While there is no "one size fits all" prescription for confronting psychological roadblocks, Defensive Pessimism will help people identify the method that works best for them, and provide practical, proven advice on changing strategies.

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Editorial Review

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Through individual case studies, Norem (psychology, Wellesley Coll.) here demonstrates her case for "defensive pessimism" as an effective tool for managing one's anxiety. For example, by imagining all of the worst-case scenarios, a speaker prepares better for a speech. Norem has developed a questionnaire to help readers determine whether they use defensive pessimism or strategic optimism (believing things will work out for the best) in daily life. She goes further to explain that much of the positive self-concept information preached since the 1980s is unrealistic and illusory. While admitting that defensive pessimism annoys other people, Norem argues that the strategy helps those who are anxious to curb their emotions and get moving toward their goals. Norem has published in *Self*, *Men's Health*, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times*, but her style here more resembles that of an academic journal article. Further, her arguments are not convincing. Of marginal value for academic libraries. Lisa Wise, Broome Cty. P.L., Binghamton, NY
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From [Booklist](#)

What would Norman Vincent Peale say? If Wellesley psychologist and professor Norem had her druthers, Mr. Positive Thinking, after reading her arguments and 18-year research results, would probably agree that negativism has its place. As a method to cope with anxiety, the construct of negative pessimism--setting low expectations, then reviewing and planning for all possible outcomes--certainly wins out over drugs and alcohol, as it does over two less visible anxiety-handling strategies: avoidance and selfhandicapping (unconsciously providing oneself with performance excuses, such as disorganization and procrastination, that will be less incriminating if situations go awry). In the author's helpful guide, disguised case histories help readers see the very real possibilities inherent in strategic optimism and its opposite--and ways to avoid clashes between these two personalities. Enlightening, if not energizing, to those anxiety-prone among us.

Barbara Jacobs

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About the Author

Julie K. Norem, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Psychology at Wellesley College. She has published many articles on personality and social behavior in psychology journals. Her work on defensive pessimism has been cited in the *New York Times*, *SELF*, the *Washington Post*, *Men's Health*, *McCall's*, and *American Health*. She lives in Wellesley, Massachusetts.

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