

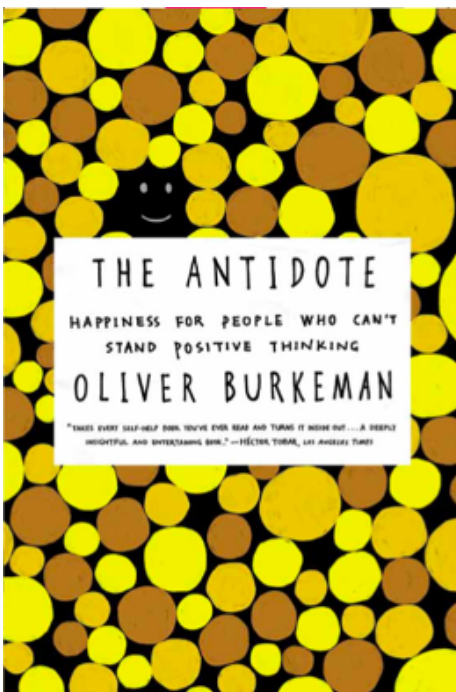
5 BIG HAPPINESS MYTHS DEBUNKED--AND THE POWER OF NEGATIVE THINKING

BY OLIVER BURKEMAN

Oliver Burkeman, author of the book *the antidote: happiness for people who can't stand positive thinking*, has spent years studying what makes people happy. It's not what you think.

It sometimes feels as if the "happiness industry"--the self-help books, motivational speakers, corporate consultants and the rest--makes its money by being useless.

It's an ingenious business model, when you think about it: promise to help people think positive, then when your techniques fail, conclude that they weren't thinking positively enough--sending them back for more. Among the many myths and misconceptions dogging the subject of happiness, here are five of the worst, along with some suggestions for what to do instead.



1. IT'S CRUCIAL TO MAINTAIN A POSITIVE MINDSET

Good luck with that. Though it's the founding principle of the positive thinking movement, trying hard to focus on upbeat thoughts and emotions frequently backfires, generating stress. One culprit is the mind's susceptibility to "ironic effects": attempting not to think about certain negative things only renders them more salient. Research underlines the point: bereaved people who try not to feel grief take longer to recover; experimental subjects who were told to try not to feel sad about some distressing news felt worse. Much more fruitful is the Buddhist-inspired notion of "non-attachment:" learning to let negative emotions arise and pass, resisting the urge to stamp them out. In any case, it's often more productive to focus on behavior, not internal states. Next time you're feeling unmotivated about starting some daunting project, allow yourself to feel unmotivated--and at the same time, open up the file and begin. Doing meaningful work is challenging enough without the burdensome demand that you feel like doing it, too.

2. AMBITIOUS GOALS, RELENTLESSLY PURSUED, ARE THE KEY TO SUCCESS

Another self-help dogma that's being further undermined every year. A too-vigorous focus on goals, research suggests, can trigger a variety of unintended consequences: it can degrade performance, and encourage ethical corner-cutting. Moreover, it can badly distort an organization, or a life, by singling out one variable for maximization, regardless of how it's connected to all the others. (Consider the hypothetical entrepreneur who vows to become a millionaire by 35 and succeeds--but only at the cost of alienating his family and friends, and ruining his health.) Even the 1996 Mount Everest disaster has been blamed on the "over-pursuit of goals."

Deep down, what may explain our obsession with goals is the fear of uncertainty--the craving to know for sure how the future will turn out--whereas in fact it's only amid uncertainty that true creativity can occur. "The quest for certainty blocks the search for meaning," wrote the psychologist Erich Fromm. "Uncertainty is the very condition to impel man to unfold his powers."

Besides, isn't there something dubious about a philosophy of happiness that locates it entirely in the future, which never seems to arrive?

3. THE BEST MANAGERS ARE THOSE WHO MAKE WORK FUN

This won't surprise anyone who's encountered managers in the mold of David Brent--but the hazards of enforced positivity get worse when it's a matter of trying to make other people, not just yourself, feel cheery. Feeling obliged to maintain a sunny facade actually imposes a cognitive burden on employees--it's a form of affective labor--sapping resources that could be more productively deployed.

Inauthentically "fun" workplaces can be deeply alienating environments: if the famous ping-pong tables and meditation pods of Silicon Valley do keep workers happy, that's probably because they reflect a commitment to letting people relax when they need to--not because anyone feels forced to use them. The quality that's really appreciated in managers, one recent study suggests, isn't fun; it's fairness, which proved much more important as a source of stress than an overwhelming workload.

4. HIGHER SELF-ESTEEM EQUALS GREATER HAPPINESS

It's better to have high self-esteem than low self-esteem. (Within limits, anyway: history's most horrifying dictators thought pretty highly of themselves, too.) But a dissenting minority of psychologists have long suspected there's a problem with the notion of "self-esteem" itself. It rests on the idea of giving your whole self one universal grade--and once you've done that, it's a constant struggle to stop that grade slipping from high down to low. Suddenly, your everyday failures--the things that go wrong for everyone, every so often--become far more consequential: instead of merely being regrettable in themselves, they threaten your overall grade.

The late psychotherapist Albert Ellis called self-esteem the greatest emotional disturbance of them all. Rate your individual acts as good or bad if you like, he advised, and by all means try to perform more good ones. But leave your self out of it.

5. AVOID PESSIMISTS AT ALL COSTS

"Toxic people," "energy vampires": whatever labels the positivity police like to give them, it's a solid plank of conventional wisdom that people who dwell on worst-case scenarios are best avoided. Yet a particular kind of pessimism is well worth cultivating. It's what the psychologist Julie Norem calls "defensive pessimism," though its origins stretch back to the Stoics of ancient Greece. Thinking carefully about how badly things could go, the Stoics Seneca and Epictetus both recognized, saps the future of its anxiety-producing power; once you've figured out how you'd cope if things went wrong, the resulting peace of mind leaves you better primed for success. A similar focus on downsides informs the Principle of Affordable Loss, part of the business philosophy known as "effectuation." Instead of asking how likely some venture is to succeed, ask whether you could tolerate the consequences if it failed. That way, you'll take the interestingly risky steps while avoiding the stupidly risky ones.

Oliver Burkeman is a writer for the Guardian, based in Brooklyn. His book *The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking* is published in paperback this week by Faber & Faber, Inc. Find him on Twitter @oliverburkeman.

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