

## DEFENSIVE PESSIMISM

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### Abstract

Recent research seems to have uncovered a form of pessimism that might be adaptive for individuals who exhibit it. *Defensive pessimism*, a strategy which involves setting low expectations in risky situations in order to prepare for failure, does not appear to hamper performance and may even bring about performance-related benefits. However, the adaptiveness of this strategy has only been evaluated in a particular context, and cannot be generalized across all situations.

**Key words:** defensive pessimism, performance, adaptiveness

### INTRODUCTION

The idea that optimism is “good” and pessimism is “bad” has become so prevalent in both psychological literature and popular culture that it has been reduced to the status of a near-cliché in the Western public mind. A great body of psychological research seems to confirm the idea that it is adaptive and even wise to maintain an optimistic rather than pessimistic outlook. Studies have linked pessimism to depression (Alloy & Ahrens, 1987; Beck, 1967, 1976), suicide (Cropley & Weckowicz, 1966), poor coping (Goodhart, 1985), and physical illness (Peterson, Seligman, & Vaillant, 1988; Scheier & Carver, 1985, 1987), while linking optimism to greater happiness and satisfaction (Dember & Brooks, 1989; Myers & Diener, 1995). Indeed, even people who hold positive illusions – that is, *unrealistically* optimistic outlooks on themselves and their futures – appear to be more content than their pessimistic counterparts (see Taylor & Brown, 1988, for an overview).

More recent research has added complexity to popular conceptions of optimism and pessimism by attempting to separate these umbrella terms into many sub-types of constructs, each with its own distinct pattern of usage and effect on the individual (see Norem & Chang, 2000, 2002 for an overview). These constructs include dispositional optimism and pessimism, which best represent the popular understanding of the terms. Dispositional optimists are people who generally expect that good things will happen – that is, those we commonly refer to simply as “optimists;” disposi-

tional pessimists generally expect negative things to happen – that is, the classic “pessimists” (Scheier & Carver, 1985). A more nuanced sub-category is that of optimistic and pessimistic explanatory styles. People with pessimistic explanatory styles tend to view negative events as personal (caused by themselves), permanent (unchangeable and indefinite), and pervasive (affecting all parts of their lives); those with optimistic styles believe negative events are caused by external factors, are finite, and will not affect all aspects of life (Peterson & Seligman, 1987). Finally, naïve optimists tend to believe negative events are less and positive events more likely to happen to them than to other people (Epstein & Meier, 1989). All of these concepts, first explored in the 1980s, were solidified over the next decades, until it seemed that most questions regarding optimism, pessimism, and the costs and benefits of each had been answered.

#### DEFENSIVE PESSIMISM: AN “ADAPTIVE” FORM OF PESSIMISM?

However, one particular line of research has challenged established, prevailing notions of optimism and pessimism: research conducted on what has been termed “defensive pessimism” (see Norem, 2000, 2001 for an overview). Defensive pessimism is a coping strategy used by certain individuals in preparation for important situations that hold the potential for either success or failure. Defensive pessimists set low expectations for themselves in such situations in order to both motivate themselves to work hard to prevent failure and to protect themselves from undue distress should failure actually occur (Norem & Cantor, 1986b). Perhaps the classic example of a defensive pessimist is a student who convinces herself she will do poorly on an upcoming exam in order to motivate herself to study harder and to cushion the negative emotions a low grade on the exam may cause. Unlike realistic pessimists, whose negative expectations are justified by poor past performance, defensive pessimists are individuals who have previously performed well in similar situations. The defensively pessimistic student has usually received high marks on exams; her negative expectations are not based on prior experience, but rather adopted for motivational and protective purposes (Norem & Cantor, 1986a).

The strategy of defensive pessimism is often contrasted with that of strategic optimism. Quite contrary to defensive pessimists, strategic optimists are people who motivate themselves to expect positive outcomes in similar self-relevant situations: a student who convinces herself she will do well on an upcoming exam and who does not think about the chance that she may receive a low grade (Norem & Cantor, 1986b).

What is unusual about research on defensive pessimism is that it represents the first time a type of pessimism has been deemed adaptive and beneficial for those who employ it (Norem, 2001). Firstly, defensive pessimism does not appear to hamper an individual’s performance. In a range of both lab tasks and academic situations, defensive pessimists have been found to perform quite well despite their negative expectations, perhaps due to the motivational aspects of their preferred strategy (Norem

& Cantor, 1986a, 1986b; Cantor & Norem, 1989). Moreover, strategic optimists do not outperform defensive pessimists on any of these tasks. Finally, when defensive pessimists are forced to abandon their negative expectations and think optimistically, their performance suffers (Norem & Illingworth, 1993). It seems tempting to conclude, then, that modern research has identified a form of pessimism that challenges the widely-accepted notion that pessimism is bad and optimism is good: defensive pessimism appears to be a positive, adaptive, and effective sub-set of pessimism.

However, all of the mentioned studies use *relative performance on a task* – be it an exam, a laboratory puzzle, or an interaction with a stranger – as the benchmark that determines whether or not a strategy is beneficial. These findings cannot be generalized to settings where a good performance is *not* the most important element in determining overall well-being or the value of a strategy. In many situations, it is affect and satisfaction rather than individual performance that determine well-being. An investigation of the effects of defensive pessimism in a domain where it is satisfaction rather than performance that determines “success” is necessary to fill a gap in research on defensive pessimism, and shed further light on optimism, pessimism, and the relative advantages and disadvantages of each.

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## DEFENZIVNI PESIMIZAM

### Sažetak

Novija istraživanja su, čini se, otkrila oblik pesimizma koji bi mogao biti adaptivan pojedincima koji ga pokazuju. *Defenzivni pesimizam*, strategija koja uključuje postavljanje niskih razina očekivanja u rizičnim situacijama radi spremnosti na neuspjeh, ne ometa izvedbu, a može dovesti i do određenog uspjeha. Međutim, adaptivnost ove strategije procijenjena je u određenom kontekstu i nije je moguće generalizirati u svim situacijama.

**Ključne riječi:** defenzivni pesimizam, izvedba, adaptivnost

Primljeno: 24.04.2008.