

The Case Against Positive Thinking

November 26, 2014

The Wall Street Journal:

Blame it on Oprah.

Positive thinking is touted as the key that unlocks success (remember “The Secret”, which the Oprah Winfrey’s show helped make an international best-seller?), but it turns out that an overwhelmingly rosy outlook can keep us from achieving our goals, according to psychologist Gabriele Oettingen.

At the physiological level, positive thinking—measured by its effect on blood pressure—relaxes us and drains us of motivation. In one of Dr. Oettingen’s studies, obese participants who fantasized about successfully losing weight lost 24 pounds less than those who refrained from doing so. In another, people in a business skills class who had positive fantasies missed class more and had lower grades at the end.

In *Rethinking Positive Thinking*, out this month from Penguin Random House, the New York University researcher discusses the pitfalls of unbridled positivity and suggests an alternative: a technique called “mental contrasting.” In separate studies, students using mental contrasting scored 10% higher on quizzes, and adults using the technique were 30% more likely to exercise, both when compared to people who only engaged in positive thinking.

Read the whole story: [*The Wall Street Journal*](#)