

Don't Look on the Bright Side?



Sure, a good attitude is never a bad thing, but a bad attitude isn't always a bad thing, either

By Dawn Klingensmith | CTW FEATURES

Always looking on the bright side can be blinding.

In general, optimism is good for our emotional and physical wellbeing. Studies show that optimists tend to have better relationships, stronger immune systems and fewer illnesses, whereas pessimistic attitudes have been linked to depression, sickness, career setbacks and relationship woes.

However, research also shows that "not all pessimism is created equal, and that a certain kind of pessimism is actually good for you," says psychologist Jeffrey Rossman, director of life management, Canyon Ranch resort spa, Lenox, Mass.

Not all optimism is created equal, either. "In American culture, we think optimism is good without qualifiers or asterisks," says Julie Norem, author of "The Positive Power of Negative Thinking: Using Defensive Pessimism to Harness Anxiety and Perform at Your Peak" (Basic Books, 2002).

However, optimism that gives rise to overconfidence can make people blind to risks,

resulting in physical, financial or emotional injury, she adds.

Unrealistic optimists believe they will succeed easily and effortlessly. "This kind of optimism turns out to be a recipe for failure because it leaves you totally unprepared for the challenges that lie ahead," says social psychologist Dr. Heidi Grant Halvorson, author of "Focus: Use Different Ways of Seeing the World for Success and Influence" (Plume, 2014).

Just as there are "good" dietary fats and bad ones, there is a kind of pessimism associated with failure and an altogether different kind that can help bring about positive outcomes for certain types of people. Indeed, there's a kind of pessimism that functions quite a bit like realistic optimism.

Good, or "defensive," pessimism is protective and leads to constructive action. People who engage in defensive pessimism look critically at situations and adjust their behavior in response to perceived risks or threats. In other words, they prepare.

"Realistic optimism is similar to defensive pessimism in that it involves thinking about

the obstacles that stand in your way," Halvorson says. "When we are realistically optimistic, we believe we will succeed, but we embrace the fact that it will involve hard work and persistence.

"Defensive pessimism and realistic optimism are both effective ways to keep yourself motivated, depending on the kind of person you are. Some of us are more energized by thinking about how everything could go wrong - and trying to keep that from happening - while others are more energized by imagining how great it will feel to succeed."

Defensive pessimism is a strategy applied to specific situations. Dispositional pessimism, on the other hand, is a state of mind that is pervasive and persistent. As an unconscious mental process or a deliberate exercise, defensive pessimism - perhaps better thought of as adaptive or strategic pessimism - takes an anxiety-inducing event or task and imagines all the ways it could go awry. Then, it devises ways to avoid or work around each potential pitfall.

"Defensive pessimism might look a little

crazy and obsessive from the outside," acknowledges Norem, an associate professor of psychology at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. "You think of all the things that can go wrong in great detail."

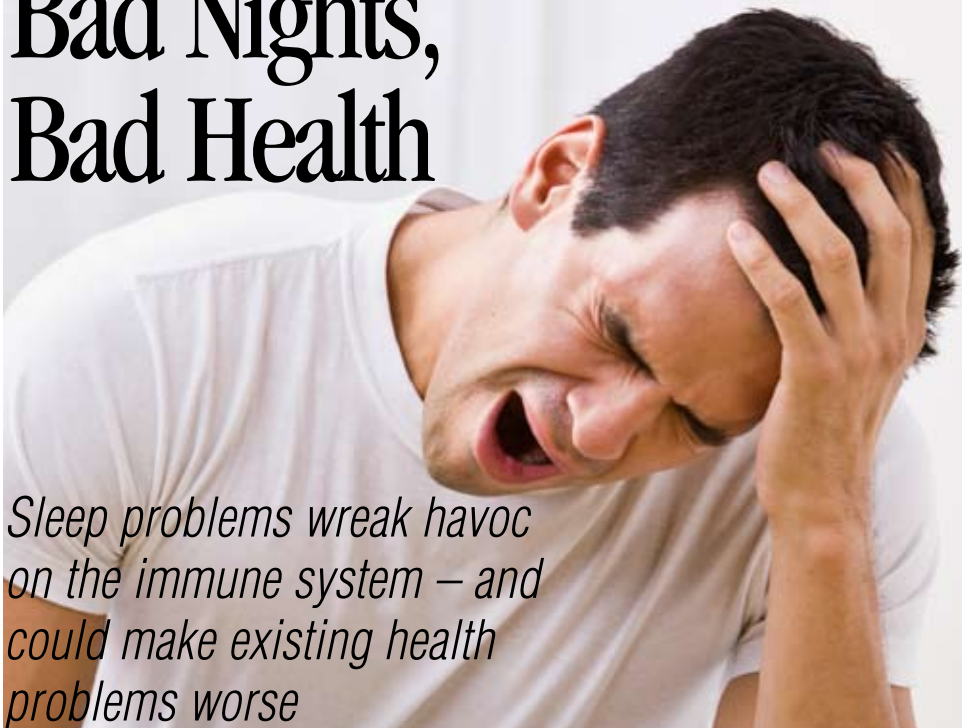
For example, before a public speech, a person might anticipate tripping over the microphone cord, spilling the pitcher of water on the lectern, scattering his or her note cards on the floor and facing a hostile audience.

Having imagined all this, the person would then take measures to avert those catastrophes by role playing in advance and showing up early to tape down the cord and place the water pitcher out of reach.

For some people, defensive pessimism could backfire by becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. But for anxious people, research shows that this exercise provides for a greater sense of control and improved prospects. "It doesn't make the anxiety go away," Norem says, "but the person usually performs better."

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Bad Nights, Bad Health



Sleep problems wreak havoc on the immune system - and could make existing health problems worse

By Maggie Flynn | CTW FEATURES

A night of tossing and turning can ruin a day before it has even begun. But a new

study suggests that chronic sleep problems could ruin health in potentially lethal ways.

There's always been a correlation between good health and good sleep. When dealing

with a cold or flu, it's normal to feel sleepy; the immune system is releasing chemicals and compounds to fight infection during sleep. What's less known, says Dr. David Gozal, chairman of pediatrics at University of Chicago Comer Children's Hospital, is how "sleep quality affects the immune system."

A study directed by Dr. Gozal that was published in the journal "Cancer Research" in January showed that fragmented sleep had an extremely powerful affect on tumor growth. In the study, a group of mice had their sleep interrupted periodically, while another group of mice was left undisturbed. After seven days, both sets of animals were then injected with tumor cells. After the tumors had grown, the mice were observed again. The tumors in the mice whose sleep was interrupted were much more invasive than those of the mice whose sleep was uninterrupted.

"There are multiple arms of the immune system and all of these are coordinated and some of them fight against cancer," Dr. Gozal explains. "And if some of them are transformed, they can help cancer survive."

There is one part of the immune system that was notable in the study.

"Toll-like receptor 4, a biological messen-

ger, helps control activation of the innate immune system," Gozal says. "It appears to be a lynchpin for the cancer-promoting effects of sleep loss."

There have been studies suggesting that higher mortality was associated with shorter sleep for those with cancer. But there was little research on the specifics of how sleep might impact the chances of those diagnosed with cancer. Gozal describes the results of this study as a "first step" in connecting sleep quality and cancer.

However, there is still a great deal of research to be done on the connections. The results of the animal model do not necessarily mean that human cancers will react the same way. What is clear, however, is that if a patient with cancer has chronic sleep problems, he or she has a higher risk of succumbing to the cancer.

Gozal was adamant that a good night's sleep is vital for everyone, including healthy people.

"It's important for people to understand that sleep is like a bank account," he says. "The same way you take care of your credit card and bank account, you have to take care of sleep."

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