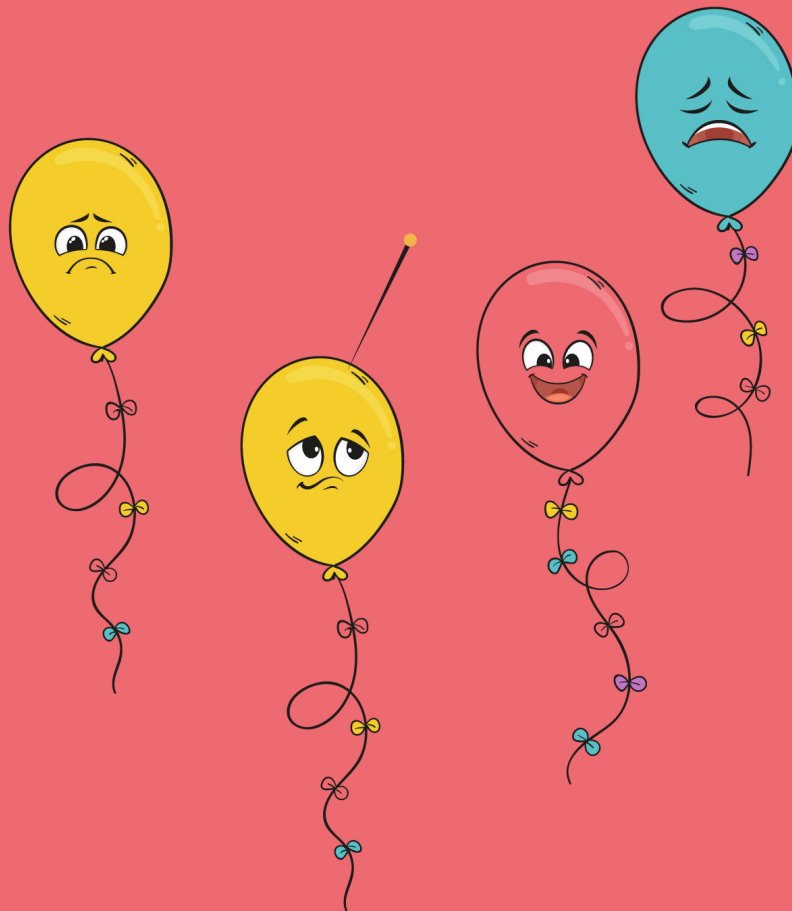


SUMMARY

SMILE OR DIE

BARBARA EHRENREICH



Summary of “Smile or Die” by Barbara Ehrenreich

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Smile or Die (2009) explores the dark side of our cultural obsession with positive thinking.

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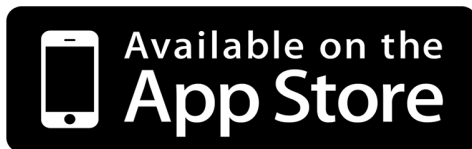


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Introduction

Have you ever heard the term “toxic positivity?” If you haven’t, toxic positivity is simply a term for the school of thought which posits that thinking positively-- and only ever thinking positively-- is the right way to live your life. This way of thinking originated because people are concerned about the effect persistent worry and stress can have on our quality of life. And to an extent, this is a valid concern! But toxic positivity neglects to acknowledge the fact that worry is natural! Although we shouldn’t let it control our lives and steal our joy, human beings are worriers by nature. And criminalizing that natural tendency through perpetual reminders to “Lighten up!” or “Look on the bright side!” actually causes more harm than help.

But have you ever wondered how our society adopted this mindset in the first place? When and how did we become so obsessed with worry? In this summary, we’re going to explore those questions along with a few others and learn why:

- Our obsession with positive thinking served the purposes of 9/11 terrorists
- Some people think that negative thoughts cause tsunamis
- Why evolution favors pessimism

Early United States Settlers Were Pessimists

Let's imagine for a moment that your eternal destiny is predetermined. Whether you're going to heaven or hell, it isn't up to you; God has already decided your fate for you and nothing you do can change that. You have no hope of saving your soul through good deeds or moral acts and if you catch yourself thinking sinful thoughts, you can know that there's your proof: you're an undeserving sinner who's destined for hell. That's what the first American settlers believed. Because they were Calvinists, they adhered to a strict, legalistic form of Protestantism that offered no room for redemption or forgiveness.

However, after growing up in such a restrictive-- and, let's be honest, pretty depressing-- faith many of their descendants were weary of this ideology and formed their own school of thought, an off-shoot of Calvinism which bore the rather unoriginal label "New Thought." The New Thought movement sought to contradict Calvinism by positing that God was a loving entity and that his spirit of love dwelt within all people. By simply drawing on this spirit and believing in the restorative powers of faith, members contended that people could be healed of all forms of suffering, including physical illness and depression.

This school of thought marked the evolution of today's positive thinking movement or the belief that people can control their fate by controlling the positive or negative energy they put into the world. Put simply, this ideology implies that if you want something badly enough or try hard enough to get it, you can change the direction of your life and override your circumstances. This thinking has since evolved to become part of the fabric of American culture; we hold a lot of pride in our national ideology that every American can succeed. And on the surface, this sounds great! In fact, it's even grounded in a modicum of truth. But the problem lies in this theory's accountability factor. Because if we believe that we can control everything that happens to us, we also start to assume we're at fault for all our negative circumstances. And that's exactly where our nation is today.

The Health & Wealth Gospel

Have you ever heard of those “name it and claim it” churches? The ones that preach what’s colloquially called “the gospel of health and wealth?” Building heavily on their origins in the New Thought movement, this ideology sells the belief that positivity is God’s will. Rather than offering their followers helpful truths-- like the fact that bad things do happen to good people and that we can rely on support networks of friends, family, and faith to help us through it-- the “prosperity gospel” teaches that following Jesus will not only make you wealthy and successful, it will remove all suffering from your life!

As anyone who has a personal faith relationship can attest, no religion can offer you these things. But unfortunately, many people are so desperate for hope and encouragement that they believe it. In fact, a 2006 Time Magazine survey found that 17% of American Christians believe in some form of a “prosperity gospel” and that, when asked if they agreed with the statement, “God wants people to prosper,” a shocking 61% of Americans said they did. This is reflected by statistics which show that the number of “mega churches”-- religious institutions which boast a weekly attendance of over 2,000 people-- has grown to 1,210 in America alone, and it’s not surprising given that most of these preach a health and wealth gospel.

So, what impact does this ideology have on the American psyche? Well, for starters, it leads to the rise of unrealistic expectations. In its most extreme form, the prosperity gospel teaches that our personal beliefs determine the outcome of every situation in our lives. So, for example, if you think positive thoughts and try really hard to do everything right, you might end up with a mansion and a million dollars. But if you find yourself crippled by debilitating arthritis or battling cancer, it must be your fault because you didn’t try hard enough. And of course, that’s precisely what’s wrong with this ideology. But in addition to the harmful effects described above, the idea that a person can shape their future through positive thinking alone also removes personal accountability or limitations from the equation.

Because if you follow this logic, then becoming a world-class painter isn't a matter of talent or putting in years of practice; you just have to want it badly enough!

As you can imagine, the idea that a person can control their life through the power of thought alone has produced some very unrealistic expectations. Because if you expect to achieve spiritual enlightenment and career success through positive thinking, why stop there? That's where "get rich quick" schemes and guidebooks come in, playing into the prosperity gospel's teachings and duping people into believing that they can make a fortune overnight simply by thinking positive thoughts.

Positive Thinking is Profitable

But not necessarily for you-- for corporations. In fact, positive thinking has become an industry all its own. Let's take a look at an example. Say you have a good friend who's driven, intelligent, and fantastic at what he does. He also happens to be black. And he's been passed over for a promotion five years running despite the fact that he has the highest sales records of anyone in the office. Coincidence? Probably not. What would you advise him to do? Filing a discrimination complaint with Human Resources would probably be the best and most practical advice. But some people-- his co-workers or supervisor, for example-- might recommend that he attend a session of motivational career coaching.

Why? Because although motivational coaching can be helpful, its popularity has increased primarily because of the benefits it offers to employers. That's because motivational coaching teaches people to hold themselves responsible for every aspect of their career, with the implication that if you don't feel happy or satisfied at work, it's because you're not trying hard enough. This in turn creates a culture of blame which prompts employees to turn their criticism inward, instead of towards management, where it sometimes belongs.

And sadly, the ideology isn't tailored to fit one's unique work environment. The same corporate edition of the prosperity gospel is preached even in companies where employees are forced to work inhumane shifts with low pay and few rights, or while they suffer discrimination. By indoctrinating employees with the belief that their conditions will get better if they just work hard enough, motivational coaching keeps workers deluded and prevents them from seeking out better opportunities.

As a result, positive thinking books, lectures, and training sessions have been consolidated into one thriving motivational coaching industry, one which, in 2007, grossed over \$1.5 million globally.

Does Positive Thinking Have Any Health Benefits?

Today, we'd like to think of ourselves as evolved and enlightened people. We don't have to believe in magic or superstition because we can rely on the power of science. Yet today, many medical professionals actually claim that positive thinking can be good for your health, despite the lack of any scientific evidence to back that up. For example, supporters of this theory claim that a positive outlook on life can eliminate stress and prevent illness. And while there is some medical truth to the fact that stress hormones attack the body's immune system (your natural defense against disease), it's a stretch to imply that thinking positively will keep your immune system strong.

Other "experts" like surgeon Bernie Siegel take this claim even further. For example, in his book *Love, Medicine, and Miracles*, Siegel contends that self-acceptance and the power of positive thinking can not only boost your immune system, it can help you overcome cancer! And to add insult to injury, he blatantly asserts that cancer can sometimes be a "blessing" which teaches patients to adopt a more optimistic worldview. But while it's certainly true that succumbing to depression makes us feel worse in every way and unarguably, we all need less stress in our lives, the truth about the medical benefits of positivity ends there. And apart from the purely insulting nature of Siegel's theories, there are plenty of scientific reasons to distrust his claim.

For example, cancer researcher Penelope Schonfield conducted a study in 2004 which concluded that cancer patients with a positive outlook had exactly the same prognosis for recovery as their pessimistic counterparts. And by contrast, a 2007 study by psychologist James Coyne claimed that psychotherapy-- which can improve a person's mood, help them feel more positive about themselves, and provide them with helpful tools for combating stress-- can increase survival rates in cancer patients.

That sounds plausible enough, doesn't it? But this study was later disproved for a variety of reasons, including the fact that not one of the experiments used in it could hold up under scientific scrutiny. It didn't help that the study's research practices were so flawed as to render its results unusable. For example, not only did the study use too few patients to be considered a reliable sample, it neglected to acknowledge the fact that some of the patients were receiving a higher quality of medical care than others, which meant that this-- rather than psychotherapy-- might be the defining factor in their recovery.

Too Much of a Good Thing

But now that we've evaluated a number of problematic elements at play in the "cult of positive thinking," for the sake of objectivity, it's time to ask: is it really so bad to be optimistic? Sure, it might not be medically or doctrinally sound, but if you have to have an obsession, is this such a bad one to have? Let's take a look at a few reasons why it might be so problematic. For starters, because our society is so resistant to pessimism, the pressure to suppress your feelings and avoid being a "downer" for your friends and family often encourages the unhealthy performativity of positive emotions. Likewise, deluding ourselves with the belief that "everything will be okay" simply because we want it to be is not only denying reality, it's restricting us from pursuing forms of growth that might actually help us influence our futures for the better.

This line of thinking can also lead to a number of harmful misconceptions like author Rhonda Byrne's assertion that the victims of the 2006 tsunami in Indonesia brought the disaster on themselves because they attracted it with "negative thinking." Byrne presented this claim in her best-selling self-help book, *The Secret*, which generates significant concern as we reflect on the number of readers who may have internalized Byrne's victim-blaming ideology, among other problematic thoughts. Logic like Byrne's also blatantly encourages people to ignore real-world threats and signs of danger by assuming that "everything will be okay."

This is not only naive, it goes against evolution! That's because one of our basic human instincts-- our 'fight or flight' response-- is an instinct designed to promote the survival of our species. If we had instead left ourselves open and vulnerable, believing that everything would work out even as a dinosaur closed its teeth around our bodies, it's unlikely that the human race would have survived. And although the author is hardly advocating that we should live as "glass half empty" people, there is a point to be made about the value of cultivating our awareness of potential threats.

Because it's good to have a positive outlook on life and hope for the best, but a refusal to do anything else leaves us unnecessarily open and vulnerable. To provide another example, let's say you've discovered a lump in your breast. The human survival response tells you to get that checked out by a doctor because it might be cancerous. But the cult of positive thinking would say that it's okay; no matter what, you'll be alright, and even if it is a tumor, you can wish it away with positive thoughts! Is that really how you want to handle all of your life concerns?

And to use an even more devastating example-- one which had global consequences-- let's think about the blind optimism of the Bush administration prior to the horrors of 9/11. Because this tragedy did not hit our government without warning. In fact, they were well aware of the potential threat of a terrorist attack. They had even received warnings about the US being targeted in addition to the discovery of a suspicious plane with student pilots. However, the FBI refused to acknowledge these details as legitimate threats, instead believing that the US was such a well-established world leader, it was immune to terrorist attacks. And this blind optimism not only put us at risk, it led our administration to take precautions which could have prevented a tragedy that affected millions of lives.

Final Summary

Our society is obsessed with the power of positive thinking. Because it's encouraging to think that we can control our own destiny and prevent negative outcomes in life, many people have wholeheartedly "drunk the Kool-Aid" of the prosperity gospel and the "cult of positive thinking." However, these schools of thought go beyond the simple truth that it's good to hope for the best; instead, these movements invite their followers to promote blind, unrealistic optimism. This ideology has a number of deeply problematic flaws that can have severe consequences for those who fail to think critically.



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