

Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

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Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal Current Directions in Psychological Science. Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.

The Powers and Perils of Optimism

by David G. Myers

[Shepperd, J. A., Waters, E., Weinstein, N. D., & Klein, W. M. \(2015\). A primer on unrealistic optimism. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 24, 232–237.](#)

There is so much to say for positive thinking. A small sampler:

Self-esteem predicts marriage satisfaction, physical and mental health, and job success and satisfaction — and that’s even after controlling for gender, socioeconomic status, and intelligence (Orth & Robins, 2013, 2014).

Self-affirmation interventions lower prejudice (Fein & Spencer, 1997) and boost the school grades of at-risk youth (Cohen & Sherman, 2014).

Internal locus of control and self-efficacy predict work and school success and healthier living (Bandura, 2013; Lefcourt, 2014).

Dispositional optimism (along with an optimistic explanatory style) protects against depression and boosts health and longevity (Seligman, 2006).

But separated from its complementary truth, the truth of positive thinking is only a half-truth. The other half-truth is that self-serving pride can produce intolerance of those “inferior,” the assumption of credit and displacement of blame, and conflicted relationships. Moreover, limitless expectations breed frequent frustrations. Life’s greatest disappointments, as well as its highest achievements, arise from exalted expectations. And, as Neil Weinstein (1980) observed in a psychology classic (cited more than 1,500 times), exalted expectations are commonplace. Illusory optimism — “an unrealistic optimism about life events” — is pervasive.

Thirty-five years and more than 1,000 studies later, James Shepperd (University of Florida), Erika Waters (Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis), Neil Weinstein (University of Arizona), and William Klein (National Cancer Institute) (2015) lucidly recap what we have learned about “unrealistic optimism.” What is it? When and why does it occur? And what are its consequences?

Unrealistic optimism is predicting a personal future that will be more favorable (a) than is probable or (b) than one's peers will experience. When 56% of high school seniors believe they will earn a graduate degree — though only 9% are likely to do so — that is “unrealistic absolute optimism” (Reynolds, Stewart, MacDonald, & Sischo, 2006). When most students perceive themselves as more likely than their classmates to get a high-paying job and own a nice home, and as less likely to have a heart attack or get cancer, that is “unrealistic comparative optimism” (Waters et al., 2011). The latter phenomenon lurks in Freud's joke about the husband who told his wife, “If one of us dies, I shall move to Paris” (2013, p. 387).

People are especially likely to experience unrealistic optimism for relatively infrequent negative events, such as having lung cancer. And they experience unrealistic optimism for events that seem controllable (such as plans to exercise, diet, and stop smoking). But unrealistic optimism drops when people approach a “moment of truth,” as when students are about to get their exams back.

Unrealistic optimism appears to be partly motivational (it enables good feelings). And it seems to be partly informational: We know others less well than ourselves, and we may compare ourselves with mental prototypes of, say, car accident victims (fast-driving drinkers).

Although optimism pays emotional dividends and enables our strivings, unrealistic optimism exacts costs. When inflated expectations go unfulfilled, the outcomes may be disappointment, regret, and lower self-esteem. When tasks take longer than optimistic “planning fallacy” projections indicate, deadlines may go unmet. When overestimating one's invulnerability to disease or accidents, misfortune may lie ahead.

Unlike overconfidence, which results in underpreparation, defensive pessimism anticipates problems and motivates coping. Positive thinking is adaptive, but negative thinking also has its place. Success in life grows from optimism that sustains hope seasoned with realism that anticipates difficulties.

To help students appreciate the ubiquity of unrealistic optimism about seemingly controllable life events, invite them to respond to this questionnaire about possible health problems (inspired by Weinstein, 1982):

Compared to your classmates, what do you think are the chances that the following health problems will trouble you at some point in the future? Use this scale:

-3 = much below average

-2 = below average

-1 = slightly below average

0 = average

+1 = slightly above average

+2 = above average

+3 = much above average

Compared to my classmates, the chances of my experiencing this problem are

- __1. Arthritis
- __2. Clogged arteries
- __3. Pneumonia
- __4. Being 40 or more pounds overweight
- __5. Laryngitis
- __6. Alcoholism
- __7. Being killed in an auto accident
- __8. Lung cancer

Invite students to average their responses to the odd-number items and then to the even-numbered items. Then ask, “How many of you were, on average, more optimistic about the even-numbered items than the odd-numbered items?” On the even-numbered items — each related to controllable behaviors — Weinstein’s Rutgers students (tested in his original experiment) demonstrated considerably more unrealistic comparative optimism than they expressed on the uncontrollable odd-numbered items.

The take-home lesson? Although generally adaptive, optimism becomes unrealistic — and risky — when we foresee our futures as improbably promising and view ourselves as immune to dangers that others face. To flourish, and to avoid perils that range from personal failure at school to collective climate catastrophe, requires forward-looking rationality. It requires steering between the rock of self-assured denial (“No problem”) and the hard place of dark despair (“It’s hopeless”). It requires realistic optimism.

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