

Self-Help and the Optimism Bias

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Abstract

This paper explores the common misconceptions associated with optimistic thinking and the perceived effects of “self-help talk.” While there may be small-scale benefits of persistent positive thinking, this “optimism” bias has led to destructive behavior and events. However dismal, depression is the more rational human response to today’s hectic environment, serving as a better self-preservation tactic than pervasive optimism.

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Many self-help gurus turn to notions of self-empowerment and willfulness to encourage depressed individuals to engage the world. However, this sort of instruction ignores what many contemporary scientists and philosophers know: a person's ability to control their own thoughts is extremely limited. Burton (2008) explained that "lower-level brain modules can profoundly affect not only our ordinary sensory perceptions but also how we experience abstract symbols" (p. 65). He went on to explain that these lower-level processes actually precede feelings of certainty when people make decisions, so unconscious thinking, not willful intentions, actually underwrites human actions (Burton, 2008). Thus, it is not at all clear that positive thinking is within a person's control or, at the very least, functions the way traditional notions of self-empowerment assume.

Sharot (2011) examined the illusory nature of optimism itself when it comes to positive perspectives on the world. She called the "optimism bias" a built-in response that "protects us from accurately perceiving the pain and difficulties the future holds, and it may defend us from viewing our options in life as somewhat limited" (p. xvi). Though she attributed many positive outcomes to this bias, she also linked it to the economic recession in the mid-2000s when "the relatively small biases of different individuals . . . combine[d] to create a much larger illusion" which led to economic disaster (Sharot, 2011, p. 209). In other words, people who are determined to look on the bright side of things may themselves be engaging in destructive behavior, regardless of whether such an attitude helps them to feel better about themselves.

In fact, it may be that depression is a rational response to an environment that is, at best, indifferent to the human species. As Thacker (2011) noted, "the world is increasingly unthinkable—a world of planetary disasters, emerging pandemics, tectonic shifts, strange

weather, oil-drenched seascapes, and the furtive, always-looming threat of extinction” (p. 1). He went on to say that the expanse of these incomprehensibly dangerous forces make it “increasingly difficult to comprehend the world in which we live and of which we are a part” (Thacker, 2011, p.1). Žižek (2010) argued that our impossible position in relation to the impending disasters around us, such as the threat of a nuclear attack, lead many people to “live in a state of collective fetishistic disavowal: we know very well that this [kind of disaster] will happen at some point, but nevertheless cannot bring ourselves to really believe it will” (p. xi). Perhaps depressed individuals are incapable of this sort of dismissive gesture, but that certainly doesn’t mean they aren’t rational; on the contrary, perhaps they are too rational for their own good.

References

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