

## THE BENEFITS OF “NEGATIVE VISUALIZATION”

OLIVER BURKEMAN

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Behind many of the most popular approaches to happiness is the simple philosophy of focusing on things going right. In the world of self-help, the most overt expression of this outlook is the technique known as “positive visualization”: if you mentally picture things turning out well, the reasoning goes, they’re far more likely to do so. “There is a deep tendency in human nature to become precisely what you visualize yourself as being,” said Norman Vincent Peale, the author of *The Power of Positive Thinking*, in a speech he gave to executives of the investment bank Merrill Lynch in the mid-1980s. Even most people who scoff at Peale’s homilies, however, might find it hard to argue with the underlying outlook: that being optimistic about the future, when you can manage it, is generally for the best.

Yet there are problems with this outlook, aside from just feeling disappointed when things don’t turn out well. These problems are particularly acute in the case of positive visualization. Over the last few years, the German-born psychologist Gabriele Oettingen and her colleagues have constructed a series of experiments designed to unearth the truth about “positive fantasies about the future.” The results are striking: Spending time and energy thinking about how well things could go, it has emerged, actually reduces most people’s motivation to achieve them. Experimental subjects who were encouraged to think about how they were going to have a particularly high-achieving week at work, for example, ended up achieving less than those who were invited to reflect on the coming week, but given no further guidelines on how to do so.

It doesn’t necessarily follow, of course, that it would be a better idea to switch to “negative visualization” instead, and to start focusing on all the ways in which things could go wrong. Yet that is precisely one of the conclusions that emerges from Stoicism, a school of philosophy that originated in Athens a few years after the death of Aristotle and that came to dominate Western thinking about happiness for nearly five centuries. For the Stoics, the ideal state of mind was tranquility—not the excitable cheer that positive thinkers usually seem to mean when they use the word “happiness.” And tranquility was to be achieved not by strenuously chasing after enjoyable experiences, but by cultivating a kind of calm indifference towards one’s circumstances. One way to do this, the

Excerpts from *The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking* by Oliver Burkeman.  
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