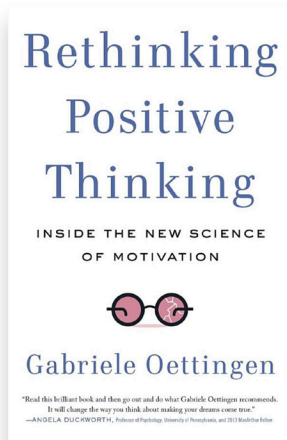


# EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

[convenenow.com/executive-summaries](https://convenenow.com/executive-summaries)



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Gabriele Oettingen

*Gabriele Oettingen is a professor of psychology at New York University and the University of Hamburg.*

# Rethinking Positive Thinking

## THE SUMMARY

### Chapter 1: Dreaming, Not Doing

The notion that simply imagining our deepest wishes coming true will help us attain them is everywhere these days. Bestselling books like *The Secret* and *Chicken Soup for the Soul* teach us that we can make good things happen just by thinking positively, and that positive thinkers are “healthier, more active, more productive--and held in higher regard by those around them.”

The cult of optimism goes further than that. Advertising puts forth happy, optimistic people as paragons of success. Politicians at all levels regale the citizenry by claiming the mantle of hope and touting the virtues of the “American dream.” Economists chart “consumer confidence” and survey business leaders about how optimistic their outlook is for the future; financial markets rise and fall on such data. Popular music celebrates the ability of dreaming and dreamers to save the world. We’re also warned from a young age and at every subsequent turn to rid ourselves of harmful “negative self-talk” or to “get out of the hole of negative thinking” if we want to succeed in life. An inspiring message posted on the wall of a Manhattan middle school exhorts kids to “Reach for the moon; even if you miss, you’ll land among the stars.

Belief in the power of optimism rests on a simple idea: by looking at the future, we can hang tough and do our best in the present. And if we are going to look ahead, thinking positively seems to be the way

# Rethinking Positive Thinking

---

to go. What else are we going to do--dwell on how doomed we are to misfortune and misery? How motivating is that? A common adage circulating on the Web (and printed on T-shirts) says it all: "Dream it. Wish it. Do it."

I got to work, spending twenty years observing people of different ages, in different contexts, in both Germany and the United States. I varied my research methods to anticipate any conceivable objection scholars might have. If I could run studies with all these variations and still come up with a similar result, I would feel confident that I was dealing with a substantial psychological phenomenon. That's exactly what happened. Again and again, much to my surprise at first, the results turned out to be the same. *Positive fantasies, wishes, and dreams detached from an assessment of past experience didn't translate into motivation to act toward a more energized, engaged life. It translated into the opposite.*

During the 1990s and early 2000s, when I gave talks presenting my findings, people responded with surprise and a dose of skepticism. "What?!" they said, their ears perking up. "I had assumed positive thinking was always helpful." Yet these audience members didn't grasp the full gravity of the findings. The ability to sustain motivation isn't a trivial matter. The course of an individual's life is determined by the action she takes in the world. When a person indulges in positive fantasies, she hamstringing herself from becoming all she is capable of being. The costs are substantial, and very real. Think of how relieved the obese women in my study would have felt if they had fantasized less and had lost more weight. Or how many more graduate students would have experienced the thrill of finding a good job. Or how much more comfort the recovering hip-replacement patients would have experienced.

As a strategy for staying motivated and achieving goals, idealizing the future doesn't work for individuals and it apparently doesn't work so well for large corporations or entire societies either. That's not to say idealizing the future "dooms" every person to failure. My results speak to statistical likelihoods of success and failure – the chances of moving ahead or staying stuck. Still, likelihoods do matter. Based on two decades of research findings, replicated across a variety of research participants, contexts, and methods, you would be ill advised to indulge in dreams about achieving your goals and then assume you're well on a path to success. Life just doesn't work that way.

## Chapter 2: The Upside of Dreaming

When we dream about satisfying our needs, we're paying closer attention to those needs as well as to relevant stimuli that might lead to their satisfaction. As William James observed, "What holds attention determines action." The traveler stranded in the desert fantasizing about water will more likely quench his thirst because he'll be alert to relevant cues that suggest water might be around. Similarly, the clergyman with the quadriplegic son indicated that as a result of his fantasies, he finds himself noticing scientific innovations that might benefit his son while watching the news or surfing the Internet.

# Rethinking Positive Thinking

---

There's an important caveat here. While fantasizing might help us satisfy some needs, it doesn't help us fulfill needs that require significant energy, effort, or commitment. We've already seen that just dreaming about positive outcomes doesn't help people realize their dreams. As other research I've done has shown, something about positive fantasies hinders us in handling hard tasks but spurs us to perform easy tasks. If the thirsty man in the desert needs only to stop walking and bend over to drink from a pool of water, savoring positive fantasies will likely help him by enabling him to notice the water and to stay alert and moving while waiting for the pool to appear. But if a person lacks purpose in life and envisions finding one by landing a leading role in a movie opposite Angelina Jolie (an achievement that usually requires, at a minimum, auditioning day after day for months or years), indulging in positive fantasies probably will hinder him in his quest.

Another reason fantasizing helps us passively stay in the game is that it may distract us from the burdensome chore of waiting. Instead of going out of our minds, or veering off into despair, we are able to imagine a pleasant outcome, something we might like to see happen. In the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder, it's common for therapists to encourage patients to visualize themselves in a safe place – a pleasant, nurturing environment that engages all their five senses. This imaging technique allows patients to get through the months or even years of therapy that might be required to process and heal the deeper trauma.

In its ability to provide short-term relief from depression, dreaming about the future works much like coping mechanisms that help people deal with extreme pain. Thought processes and behaviors such as denying a problem's existence or losing oneself in drinking or other drugs have been shown to engender more depression as time goes on. People fall into passivity and don't actually do much about the cause of their pain; over time, it wears on their mood. Yet short-term alleviation of depression is no insignificant thing. Getting people to dream might well be a valuable asset in therapists' toolboxes as a "Band-Aid" solution when people need immediate relief.

For some, pointing to the fleeting pleasures of dreaming might seem a strange way to argue that dreams have value. Aren't people too hedonistic already and not sober and circumspect enough? As Barbara Ehrenreich suggests, the problem seems to be that we have become so attached to the comforts of positive thinking that we lose our grasp on the external "reality" and compromise our ability to solve pressing social and political problems.

But positive fantasies may actually help you become more in tune with what is real, not less. I'm talking about a certain kind of reality here: what you really want. Dreaming is a vital way of claiming what belongs to you, what resonates with you on a deeper, often hidden level. It's also an effective and even critical path to discovering what isn't real for you.

Vividly imagining a potential future gives you an opportunity to mentally experience what you might do or become, to explore possible choices and assess whether they are right for you. It yields valuable information and prepares you to make the right decision for the future. Fantasizing is a powerful

# Rethinking Positive Thinking

---

means of exploration because it allows you a virtual experience of your wishes without requiring that you actually take action and make a commitment. These wishes can unfold in the immediate future – even in the next hour or day of your life.

Looking more closely at everyday life, one can find many examples of the explorative use of dreaming. When high school students are deciding where to go to college, they typically visit campuses to “get a feel” for what it might be like to go there. During these visits, as prospective students walk around the academic buildings, libraries, and dorms, they typically imagine themselves in these places the following year. They embark on extended positive fantasies about waking up each day in the dorms, eating their meals in the dining hall or at nearby restaurants, going to classes in the ivy-covered buildings, smelling the wood of the staircases as they walk between levels in the library, hanging out on the lawn playing Frisbee or talking to their friends. Returning home from campus visits, students remember their fantasies and may deepen them as they learn about other schools and move toward a final decision. To some extent, this entire process injects a dose of randomness into college selection; if a student happened to visit a certain campus on a cold and rainy day, her fantasies are likely to be significantly different than if she had visited when the weather was merely humid and overcast, or if it was hot and sunny and all the students were hanging out on the arts lawn.

It’s common for people to pursue the task of planning their futures in a rational way. They make long lists of what they want to accomplish, sometimes making additional lists of the likely pros and cons attached to each choice. Fantasizing is a different process with advantages of its own. Watching images flow freely in their minds, people let themselves go, and in the process arrive at a comprehensive, intuitive understanding of what they really want for themselves, what is essential to their doing and being. They become aware not just of what makes sense, but of what feels right.

Dreams are good for quite a lot, then – it just depends on the specific context. They might not help us lose more weight, quit smoking, or get a job, but they do help us stay alive in the desert, or survive under political repression. The key is simply not to ask more of our fantasies than they can give us. So long as we understand the power and limits of positive fantasies, they can serve us as helpmates, not as restraints. We would be wrong to jettison our dreams, just as we are wrong to blindly assume that simply dreaming something can make it so.

## **Chapter 3: Fooling Our Minds**

So why don’t positive dreams about the future help us stop smoking, get in better shape, and improve our relationships? What is it about dreaming – as opposed to optimism based on reasonable expectations about the future – that hampers people from achieving their wishes? How does dreaming affect us on a cognitive, emotional, and even physiological level?

# Rethinking Positive Thinking

---

Students who had been asked to positively fantasize reported feeling less energized than those who had been prompted to give a neutral fantasy. In addition, the less energized students reported feeling, the less they had accomplished during the week in question. Positive fantasies led to lower energy levels, which in turn predicted lower accomplishment. This result is astounding when we keep in mind that we were asking students in the study only to spend a few minutes fantasizing. Yet that alone was enough to deflate their energy and diminish their performance for the following week.

These results correspond well with many people's daily experiences. In the face of a big challenge or chore, people often fantasize about how it feels to have achieved it. In the moment, the fantasy feels good, and it also feels relaxing – so much so that we don't take action.

The tendency of our dreams to diminish motivation and action begged the question of what was going on in our minds to bring about increased relaxation. "Realists" are critical of positive fantasies and often point to dreaming as a hedonistic and even sinful pursuit, yet they often haven't gone to the trouble of understanding how dreaming actually works. I had a hypothesis: dreaming about the future operates on a nonconscious level to affect our cognition – that is, how we perceive our world. In dreaming about something, we don't just take delight in an imagined future. As we're dreaming, our minds are fooled into actually thinking we've attained that future. As far as our minds are concerned, dreaming becomes a fairly convincing (if short-lived) substitute for doing. We've seen this before; the substitution of dreaming for doing is precisely what enables positive fantasies to help us explore possible futures.

More broadly, it seems clear that our imaginations are powerful enough to have real-life effects. Recent research in psychology has found that repeatedly imagining the act of eating a delicious food reduces our actual consumption of that food (something you might try if you're trying to kick your chocolate habit). Our results likewise suggest that, far from causing something to occur in reality, as many people think, the act of imagining can stop something from coming into being. In particular, by fooling our brains into thinking we're already successful, *we lose motivation and energy to do what it takes to actually become successful.*

We can now understand why our dreams so often relax us and sink our performance, no matter how strongly committed we may feel we are to attaining them. As a result of dreaming, our minds tell us that we don't need to exercise or eat right in order to lose weight. We don't need to pound the pavement and show up at interview after interview in search of a job. If we're a corporate leader dreaming of changing the organization, we don't need to bother ourselves with all the hard work of communicating, allocating funding, and coaching managers to implement the change. Our minds have already shot ahead to the end state of success and accomplishment. We relax and enjoy the state of attainment – even though everything in reality still remains to be done. Unknowingly, we become singularly unprepared for the one thing that might allow us to actually achieve success: taking action.



# Rethinking Positive Thinking

---

What makes dreaming even more damaging to staying engaged and moving ahead in life is that it skews how we search for information about the world, leaving us with an imbalanced and possibly unrealistic view. Because our dreams spawn a pleasant, relaxed state in which we perceive that we've already fulfilled our wishes, it seems logical that we'd want to stay in this state for as long as possible and that we'd pay more attention to information that seemed to prolong the fantasy. If through our dreams we virtually experience going on an African safari, we'd look for newspaper articles that depicted the delights of a safari rather than articles that revealed how expensive, dangerous, or unsatisfying a safari is. Over time, we'd come to inhabit a "dream world" of our own making, composing valid but lopsided information from outside. The nuances and complexity of real life would get lost, and the actual decisions we make would suffer in turn.

People who positively fantasize about the future – and that's probably all of us – thus put themselves in a double bind. On the one hand, they inadvertently relax and fool their minds into thinking they've attained their wishes. Meanwhile, their dreams lock them cognitively into these same wishes, sustaining their fantasies by avoiding information that might otherwise prompt them to step outside, get some perspective on their wishes, and perhaps resolve to take a different path. The result all too often is frustration, failure, and, at the extreme, a deep-seated feeling of being stuck. We dream of fitting into those skinny jeans, we resolve to lose weight, we sustain our fantasies about how wonderful it would be to look good in the outfit, and then we fail again and again to turn down those supersized orders of fries or make the effort to take a dance class after a long day at the office. We look around, wondering why others seem to be successful at realizing their ambitions – while we're not.

It isn't enough to sit and dream; we have to take action and make sacrifices to buy a ticket in life. Our dreams may be realizable, but they come down to challenges that require engagement and action. The good news, as we'll see, is that it's possible to move energetically toward many of our wishes, and to do a much better job deciding which wishes are worth our effort and which aren't. The solution, affirmed by many other experiments I've done, isn't to do away with dreaming and positive thinking. Rather, it's making the most of our fantasies by brushing them up against the very thing most of us are taught to ignore or diminish: the obstacles that stand in our way.

## **Chapter 4: The Wise Pursuit of Our Dreams**

Back in 1990, when my research was first beginning to show that positive fantasies were not helping people achieve their wishes, I was disappointed. I had embarked on studying dreams not merely because I found them interesting, but because I had hoped that dreaming might help people who were having trouble achieving wishes large and small. It was difficult to focus my work on fantasies knowing that they made individuals continue to struggle, so I wondered if there was anything I could do to the process of dreaming to turn things around and make dreams more helpful for achieving wishes. In particular, since positive fantasies tended to relax people, was there a way that I could use dreaming to wake them up, get them into gear, and motivate them to succeed?

# Rethinking Positive Thinking

---

I reasoned that the best way to get people up and moving was to ask them to dream and then to confront them right away with the realities that stood in the way of their dreams. I called this confrontation “mental contrasting.” If I could ground fantasies in reality through mental contrasting, I might be able to circumvent the calming effects of dreaming and mobilize dreams as a tool for prompting directed action.

The results were surprising. We had expected that mental contrasting would give all participants who tried it a boost, but when we pored through the data, we saw that only some students who had mentally contrasted wound up feeling more energized and immediately tried to realize their wishes. The key was whether they thought they stood a good chance of success to begin with. If students had expectations (based on past experience) that they would succeed, then mental contrasting caused them to be significantly more energized and more promptly engaged than members of the other groups. If students who had mentally contrasted judged success unlikely, then they felt less energized and took less action around their wishes than did other participants.

I suspected that mental contrasting would help with many kinds of everyday difficulties. A person in a relationship that isn't quite working could do mental contrasting, grasp the obstacles in himself that prevent him from experiencing more harmony with his partner, and disengage, freeing himself to pursue another, more satisfying relationship. Or suppose a schoolteacher was waiting in line for coffee before her 8 a.m. class and there were ten people in front of her. She could either wait it out and be late or forgo the coffee and make it to her class on time. If she did mental contrasting, maybe she'd realize that she was okay being late for class. On the other hand, she might realize that she actually did want to be on time for class. In that case, she'd disengage from her wish of getting a coffee, resolving to get one after class instead. Whatever she wound up doing, she'd be doing it with full force. She'd find the path that was right for her and go for it. What if everybody used this tool? Wouldn't life be easier, richer, and more fulfilling each and every day? That's the potential I saw in mental contrasting.

Just a few minutes of mental contrasting helped students overcome an anxious and unjustified fantasy and approach the object of their fears. Given how pervasive xenophobia is, not to mention how many individuals suffer from an endless variety of other unjustified or overblown fears, it's exciting to think that mental contrasting might provide an easy, cheap, and effective way of confronting those fears head on and engaging more fully with life.

A series of studies has revealed mental contrasting to be an effective strategy for fulfilling wishes – certainly far more effective than merely indulging in dreams about a happy future. I've shown this for a range of different wishes and contexts, from solving personal problems to vocational training to creativity. The research I've mentioned and other experiments I've conducted have upheld these findings for participants of different ages, socioeconomic status, and cultures, showing that mental contrasting brings insight into our real wishes and then increases energy and planning for actually achieving our dearest wishes and dreams.

# Rethinking Positive Thinking

---

What makes these results especially compelling is the nature of mental contrasting itself. Many people think that if you have difficulties realizing your wishes and achieving your goals, you need to spend months or years in therapy or do session after session with a coach or read endless self-improvement books. While these techniques may help, we achieved measurable results in our studies using an exercise that took between five and twenty minutes to complete (in everyday life, it will usually take even less time, as we shall see). Imagine what might happen if you got in the habit of performing quick mental contrasting exercises daily for all sorts of wishes, concerns, and anxieties, ranging from how you'd like to spend your evening to how'd you'd like to spend the next twenty years of your life.

The path to realizing your wishes – however big or small they might be, whether they're felt in good times or in bad – is not to push your obstacles aside and focus only on your wishes, but rather to acknowledge both and bring them into contact with each other: first the wish, then the reality. When you do that, something wonderful happens. Working on your own, without the aid of a therapist, coach, or medications, you are energized to pursue wishes that you judge yourself capable of achieving (such as spending a few minutes away from a sick relative), and you face the reality of unattainable wishes (such as miraculously healing that relative). In the latter case, you free yourself to pursue more feasible wishes. You regulate your own path, engaging more fully in life, leading yourself over time to the wise pursuit of your dreams.

## **Chapter 5: Engaging Our Nonconscious Minds**

Given how unfamiliar mental contrasting was and the pushback from my peers, I wanted to understand how and why it worked. Beyond that, the phenomenon of mental contrasting seemed striking enough to require exploration of the underlying mechanisms. Study participants repeatedly voiced how much they benefited from mental contrasting. We noticed how engaged they were while performing it and could see in their writings how deeply immersed they became in their imaginations. When, as part of a study, participants had to check back a couple of weeks later, often 80 percent to 90 percent of them would comply – a rate much higher than the norm for these types of experiments. Some student participants were so taken by mental contrasting that they went on to work as research assistants in my lab and attend graduate school in psychology.

Watching participants perform mental contrasting, we could tell by their facial expressions that something was happening in their minds. Often participants seemed to experience insights, their eyes brightening and their bodies straightening in their chairs, suggesting an unusual combination of relief and focus. I suspected that mental contrasting wasn't just working on a conscious level; it was engaging people's nonconscious minds, reshaping the very way they viewed reality. These nonconscious shifts in perception were making behavior changes possible for people in situations when they felt a wish was reachable – doing the work seemingly by magic, so that pursuing wished was easy.



# Rethinking Positive Thinking

---

As we expected, students who had performed mental contrasting were more energized than other students when their wishes were feasible, and less energized when those wishes were far-fetched. The same was true for how “in control” and how clear participants felt about their wishes. The strength of the cognitive associations between future and reality in turn predicted how intensely students felt about pursuing their goals. Students who hadn’t performed mental contrasting linked the future and reality in their minds to only a moderate extent and were only lukewarm about pursuing their wishes. This was true whether or not they thought their wishes were attainable.

Forging a link between the desired future and present reality isn’t the only way mental contrasting acts on our nonconscious minds. Our research has also established that mental contrasting forges powerful, nonconscious associations between the obstacles we perceive and the instrumental behavior we need to take to overcome the obstacle. The association in turn explains actual, observable changes in behavior.

Similar experiments confirmed how helpful mental contrasting was in the processing of negative feedback. When students performed mental contrasting, they were better able to hear negative feedback and translate it into effective plans for realizing their wishes. They also had higher self-esteem, seeing themselves as more competent than participants in the control groups. They perceived negative feedback constructively as identifying a deficit that could be mastered in the future, that was restricted to the given situation, and that was repairable through effort. Meanwhile, mental contrasting made negative feedback harder to take when success wasn’t likely, further nudging individuals to let go of these unrealistic dreams and move on to something more promising.

Discoveries, insights, revelations – these happen to people during and immediately after mental contrasting. Mental contrasting creates powerful changes in people, affecting how they perceive reality and how they respond to the feedback others give. New associations form in people’s minds, near-instant connections between dream and obstacle, between obstacle and the means of overcoming the obstacle. All of a sudden, in ways that can scarcely be put into words, the obstacle seems more clearly defined than it did before. That’s the “magic” of mental contrasting, explaining why such a short mental exercise, accessible to anyone who is open to it, young or old, from all walks of life, can prove so powerful as a self-regulatory strategy for fulfilling wishes and addressing concerns of all kinds.

We’re used to exerting conscious effort to achieve our goals – to push hard, to strive. There is nothing wrong, of course, with doing that. But you can accomplish so much more, direct your energies better, and pursue what really matters to you and what you realistically can achieve by moving beyond the conscious and the rational. *Dreaming a little and then imagining the obstacle lets you unlock new potentials inside yourself*, potentials you scarcely knew existed. Until now, you have likely approached life using only part of your mind’s latent capacities. Mental contrasting lets you finally engage in viable, heartfelt wishes with everything you’ve got.

# Rethinking Positive Thinking

---

## Chapter 6: The Magic of WOOP

It might seem obvious that mental contrasting would help people pursue feasible wishes, given the research I've presented so far. Yet phenomena observed under strictly controlled laboratory conditions sometimes aren't observed under the more diverse and unpredictable circumstances of the real world. The gap between basic science and lay applications of science can still be huge; you can observe this by simply opening up a scientific journal and trying to parse through the obtuse language and statistical terms. In the case of mental contrasting, we didn't know if people would readily learn this exercise and deploy it on their own to address their problems. It turned out that they did – with results every bit as compelling as those we'd seen in our laboratory experiments. We also discovered that introducing a new element – the formulation of an explicit plan in case the obstacle was encountered – made mental contrasting work even better than it had been on its own. Thus the laboratory magic of mental contrasting was translated into real-life magic.

How can something as simple as forming an “if situation, then behavior” statement do so much to plug the gap between intentions and behavior, helping people perform better? Like mental contrasting, implementation intentions seemingly work magic by operating on an automatic or nonconscious level. In fact, forming implementation intentions prepares us mentally to take action by pre-activating in our minds the situation of an obstacle or opportunity arising.

In discussing our work together, Peter Gollwitzer and I sensed that mental contrasting and implementation intentions would complement each other as a metacognitive strategy. We've seen that mental contrasting prepares you cognitively to pursue wishes by linking the future and the obstacles in your mind. How much better off might you be if you were also explicitly engaging your mind to respond in predetermined ways to the specified obstacles once they occur? In addition, mental contrasting gets people focused and committed to a wish – the precondition for implementation intentions to work. Performing mental contrasting and implementation intentions together--what we at first somewhat inelegantly termed MCII – could make selecting and attaining wishes easier and more effective by maximizing the work your mind does without your conscious effort. As a practical strategy for handling daily life, MCII could enable you to put all of yourself behind your wishes, regulating your behavior so you can more effectively engage with the world around you.

As I started to teach mental contrasting with implementation intentions as a single, unified tool, I realized that we needed a better name than “MCII.” The name WOOP – Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan – came to us almost by accident in the course of fielding a study. We liked how accessible WOOP was and how well it captured the key steps. As a tool, WOOP is what psychologists call “content neutral,” that is, it can be used to help with any kind of wish you might have, short term or long term, big or small. If you're a professional, you can use it to reach a new milestone in your career, improve your skills--whatever you can think of. If you're a student, you can apply it to study more productively. If you're a mom or dad, you can apply it to handle challenging situations with your children more

# Rethinking Positive Thinking

---

effectively. Anyone can use it in his or her personal life for any purpose – for instance, to form closer relationships with others or to improve health. I'd like to take you through the exercise in a bit more detail:

First of all, remember that WOOP is different from other exercises you may have tried in that it involves free thoughts and images rather than rational or effortful thinking. You need to focus so that the thoughts and images will flow. Find a secluded place where you can enjoy some peace and quiet. Make yourself comfortable so that you can focus. If this is your first time, fifteen to twenty minutes should be enough time for the exercise. As you become more familiar with WOOP, you will be able to create your mental space and do it much more quickly – in a matter of a few minutes or even less.

We begin with the “W” in WOOP, a wish or concern that you might have. Relax, take another breath, and think about one wish or concern in your personal or professional life, something that is challenging but that you think is possible for you to achieve in a given period of time. It could be something you could accomplish in a year, a month, a week, a day – whatever wish you decide to WOOP. If you have several wishes for the same time period, pick the one that is most important to you. Put the wish or concern in your mind's eye and hold it there.

Now think of the first “O” in WOOP, the outcome. What is the best thing that you associate with fulfilling your wish or solving your concern? Identify this outcome and keep it in your mind's eye. Really think about it; imagine the relevant events and experiences as vividly as possible. Let your mind go. Don't hesitate to give your thoughts and images free rein. Take your time; you may close your eyes if you would like.

When you are ready, open your eyes again. It's time to focus on the second “O” in WOOP, the obstacle. Sometimes things do not work out as well as we would like. What is it in you that holds you back? What is it *really*? Find the most critical, internal obstacle that prevents you from fulfilling your wish or solving your concern. What thoughts or behaviors might play a role? How about habits or preconceived notions? When thinking about obstacles, people often look to the external world, naming circumstances or individuals they feel are blocking them. But by choosing a wish that we think is feasible, we're already accounting for obstacles outside us (if serious obstacles outside of us existed, the wish wouldn't be feasible). The point of this exercise is to help us prevent ourselves from getting in the way of realizing our own dreams.

In selecting an internal obstacle, it's also important to dig deep enough to make sure you are addressing one that's critical to you. Depending on the situation, this obstacle might be as specific as spending too much time in front of the computer or as general as being tired or being anxious. The obstacle could be a behavior, an emotion, an obsessive thought, an impulse, a bad habit, assumptions you jump to, or just a silly, vain behavior. Sometimes it takes a little bit of thought and patience to really understand your inner barriers and how you behave or react unconstructively. Sticking with the process can be hard at first since we're so often dissuaded from taking honest looks

# Rethinking Positive Thinking

---

at ourselves, but finding your most relevant obstacle really pays off. Please keep the obstacle in your mind's eye. Then really think about it. Imagine the relevant events and experiences as vividly as possible. Once again, let your mind go. Do not hesitate to give your thoughts and images free rein.

When you are ready, let's move to the "P" part of WOOP – the plan. What can you do to overcome or circumvent your obstacle? Name one thought or action you can take – the most effective one - and hold it in your mind. Then think about when and where the obstacle will next occur. Form an if-then plan: "If obstacle x occurs (when and where), then I will perform behavior y." Repeat this if – then plan to yourself one more time.

And that's it. You're done. Wasn't that simple? You can do WOOP as often as you like and in any location where you can create a little mental space for yourself. You can close your eyes and WOOP on the bus, train, or plane, when you are bored, while waiting for your colleagues or friends. Do WOOP every morning or when you go to bed at night. Invent a ritual around WOOP, but also do it opportunistically in stressful situations and in situations where your problems are vague and its solutions uncertain.

You can use WOOP in all life circumstances, not only if you are struggling or feel you need improvement. Even good job candidates or strong students can use WOOP to be even more creative and productive, as it can help them overcome any fears of failure they might have or other mental blocks that might impede them from developing to their full potential. Also, the very process of performing WOOP can help anyone adjust his or her wishes. You might find as you perform WOOP that a wish you thought was challenging but attainable is not so attainable after all; as you come face-to-face with the obstacle, it winds up being far more difficult and costlier than you thought. In this way, WOOP is still helping you perform at your best by helping you disengage from unfeasible wishes and focus on wishes that are feasible.

## **Chapter 7: WOOP Your Life**

If you're still skeptical about WOOP, you have a right to be. Many popular self-help or "success" books promise readers they'll enjoy better health, foster stronger relationships, find new financial opportunities, or achieve any other wish they might imagine. Also, the very nature of WOOP might make you doubt the technique. WOOP doesn't cost anything to learn, it doesn't involve significant expenditure of time, it doesn't come with harmful side effects, its effects can begin immediately, it does not require working with a trainer or other professional, and it can be applied to any kind of wish.

Our research suggests that to the extent people spontaneously perform mental contrasting, they tend to do so when they are feeling sad (and hence are more aware of impending problems) and when they are faced with the need to take immediate action toward a wish. There are some people who are more inclined to perform mental contrasting – for instance, those who welcome mentally

# Rethinking Positive Thinking

---

challenging tasks – but in general, mental contrasting is not something the vast majority of people do naturally in their daily lives. You have to purposefully apply WOOP to wishes that may lie dormant or situations facing you in order to reap the full benefits of mental contrasting. In fact, work we did imaging brain responses to mental contrasting showed enhanced activity in sections of the brain responsible for willfulness, memory, and more vivid, holistic thinking – a much different pattern than when people are in their normal resting state or when they are merely fantasizing about the desired future.

If you do apply WOOP to your daily life, you'll find that it really does work. Over the past decade, my colleagues and I have tested the technique with individuals of different cultures, ages, and socioeconomic conditions; in men and women and with diverse wishes; in a number of settings; and both in person and online. Again and again, we've found that WOOP enables people to pursue their wishes more wisely, producing more desirable short- and long-term results than more traditional treatments or no intervention at all. If you want a proven means of regulating your energies so that you move more effectively toward fulfilling your wishes, and if you want a method that is also safe, cheap, and easy to use, you should try WOOP.

So many popular self-help programs and strategies aren't scientifically validated. If you have something in your life that you'd really like to change—or even if you just want to enjoy it more—you'd be well advised to dispense with the trendy “positive thinking” approach and give WOOP a try. You also might think about the wider social implications of this method. Recognizing the difficulty individuals have in organizing their lives, we so often turn to government and policy making to get people to behave more constructively. Through laws and regulations, we try to get people to do things like eat better, stay off drugs, work harder, and take better care of their families. While WOOP can hardly substitute for social regulation, it can serve as an important complementary tool, enabling individuals to better regulate their own lives for the betterment of all.

WOOP is by no means a cure-all, but think of how much in our imperfect world might be changed if millions of people were practicing WOOP on a regular basis. How much might we save in lives and financial resources if we were able to get millions of people to eat healthier, exercise more, or cut down on cigarette smoking? How many marriages might be saved if we could get millions of partners to interact in more reasonable, less anxious ways? How much more productive might our economy be if millions of employees were less stressed-out and more engaged at work? How much better might our society function if our children were able to study better and pursue more energetically the career paths that were right for them? We've only begun to find out.

## **Chapter 8: Your Friend for Life**

Scientific studies that confirm the power of WOOP might lead you to believe that WOOP is an easy fix, a “pill” you swallow to feel an immediate result. Participants in our studies show important, long-term changes in their behavior—such as eating more vegetables, exercising more, drinking less—after



# Rethinking Positive Thinking

---

as little as a single WOOP session. Yet WOOP is more than a one-off way of dealing with a particular concern or wish. It's a living tool that you can use in your everyday life. Practiced daily over an extended period of time, WOOP enables you to not only solve specific problems or wishes, but live a life that is balanced, meaningful, and generally happy.

WOOP is like any tool – a hammer, a piano, a bicycle – in that people will use it in different ways and to different ends. In some situations, people will use WOOP to adjust their wishes, whereas in other circumstances they will use it to identify obstacles that prove difficult to overcome, to disengage from pursuits that are making them unhappy, to pursue dreams that have eluded them in the past, or simply to understand their wishes better. No matter how you choose to use WOOP, remember that this strategy is fundamentally about connecting to others and to the world at large. Yes, you learn a lot about yourself through the process of mental contrasting, but that self-knowledge always exists in service to the larger purpose of a connection with others in the world.

WOOP is an opportunity to get unstuck and come out of your shell. Even in societies in which certain freedoms are guaranteed and our choices of action are many, we all don't necessarily have the ability to be free, because we suffer from hang-ups or sensitivities that bedevil us. We tell ourselves we can't do certain things. We fail to look our insecurities in the face, blaming others or circumstances outside of us for our frustrations. We need to work at becoming free. We need to regulate ourselves so that at each moment we pursue what we actually want to pursue, not necessarily what other people tell us to pursue or what we think they want us to pursue. We also have to regulate ourselves so that we can wisely choose among the thousands of paths open to us. Something as simple as taking a moment to envision a longed-for future and then identifying how we are blocking our own wishes makes all the difference. Cutting through layers of excuses and untested beliefs, sifting through conflicting priorities, we launch ourselves toward our feasible dreams and away from unfeasible ones. Mobilizing our nonconscious minds, we lock in to our attainable desires and ensure that we're moving ahead along our chosen paths with our full energies.

We are just beginning to rethink positive thinking, evolving the new science of motivation and mobilizing it to improve individuals' lives and address social problems. But what we do know is clear. To make the most of our lives, we must face up to the role we play in hamstringing our own wishes. Doing so isn't complicated, but it is profound and life changing. With WOOP and mental contrasting, we motivate and empower ourselves to take action when it will really benefit us and those around us. We unleash powerful forces within us so that we can change habits of thought and behavior we've had for years. It sounds like magic, and it feels like magic, but the science shows it's real. Wishing you good luck on your journey of discovery, I'll end with two vital questions that I hope you never stop asking yourself: What is your dearest wish? What holds you back from achieving it?