

EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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Rethinking Positive Thinking

INSIDE THE NEW SCIENCE
OF MOTIVATION



Gabriele Oettingen

"Read this brilliant book and then go out and do what Gabriele Oettingen recommends. It will change the way you think about making your dreams come true."
—ANGELA DUCHWORTH, Professor of Psychology, University of Pennsylvania, and TED Medalist Fellow

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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THE NUTSHELL

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. 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.

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It might seem obvious that mental contrasting would help people pursue feasible wishes. However, 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.

We developed WOOP – Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan – almost by accident in the course of fielding a study. 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. I'd like to take you through the exercise in a bit more detail:

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.

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. Find the most critical, internal obstacle that prevents you from fulfilling your wish or solving your concern. 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.

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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.

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.

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?