

THE BIG IDEAS

Downside of Dreaming

= Becoming less energized to act.

Mental Contrasting

Wish + Obstacle.

Implementation Intentions

If + Then.

WOOP!

Wish + Outcome + Obstacle + Plan.

WOOP As a Daily Tool

4 steps to awesome.

Two Vital Questions

What's your wish? What gets in way?

Rethinking Positive Thinking

Inside the New Science of Motivation

BY GABRIELE OETTINGEN · CURRENT © 2014 · 240 PAGES

“What is your dearest wish? What dreams do you have for the future? What do you want to be or do? Imagine your dream coming true. How wonderful would it be. How fulfilling.

What holds you back from realizing your wish? What is it in *you* that stops you from really going for it?

Rethinking Positive Thinking is a book about wishes and how to fulfill them. It draws on twenty years of research in the science of motivation. And it presents a single, surprising idea: the obstacles that we think most impede us from realizing our deepest wishes can actually hasten their fulfillment.”

~ Gabriele Oettingen from *Rethinking Positive Thinking*

Gabriel Oettingen is one of the world's leading researchers in (as per the sub-title), “The New Science of Motivation.”

A ton of [positive psychologists](#) reference her work—from Heidi Grant Halvorson in [Succeed](#) to Piers Steel in [The Procrastination Equation](#).

The basic idea of the book is captured in a clever image on the cover: Rose colored glasses with one lens cracked.

Oettingen walks us thru the compelling research that demonstrates the power of seeing both the positive AND the challenges. When we contrast our *wishes* with the *obstacles* to their attainment we, almost magically, catalyze an extraordinarily higher level of performance.

Oettingen has been investigating this for 20 years and the book is packed with an array of research studies that she and her team have conducted to shine light on the various facets of the process. We also learn some practical tips on how to apply these ideas to our lives—learning about mental contrasting, implementation intentions and how to get our WOOP on (more on that in a moment!). (Get the book [here](#).)

For now, I'm excited to share some of my favorite Big Ideas we can apply today so let's jump straight in!

THE DOWNSIDE OF MERELY DREAMING

“If you want to unwind, you can take some deep breaths, get a massage, or go for a walk—but you can also try simply closing your eyes and fantasizing about some future outcome that you might enjoy. But what about when your objective is to make your wish a reality? The *last* thing you want to be is relaxed. You want to be energized to get off the couch and lose those pounds or find that job or study for that test, and you want to be motivated enough to stay engaged even when the inevitable obstacles arise. We've seen that the principle of ‘Dream it. Wish it. Do it.’ does not hold true, and now we know why: in dreaming it, you undercut the energy you need to do it. You put yourself in a temporary state of bliss, calmness—and lethargy.”

“Rethinking Positive Thinking presents scientific research suggesting that starry-eyed dreaming isn't all it's cracked up to be. The book then examines and documents the power of a deceptively simple task: juxtaposing our dreams with the obstacles that prevent their attainment.”

~ Gabriele Oettingen

"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 your path to success. Life just doesn't work that way."

~ Gabriele Oettingen

Oettingen shares some truly fascinating research about the (negative) impacts of merely fantasizing about a desired outcome.

Get this: Scientists can bring people into a lab, measure their blood pressure, and then have them positively fantasize then take their blood pressure again. In a matter of minutes, their blood pressure will go down significantly.

Now, that might sound like a good thing (and, of course, learning how to relax and oscillate between being on and off is essential to sustained peak performance), BUT if you want to actually achieve the outcome you're fantasizing about, you want to end your sessions feeling ENERGIZED not mellow.

Oettingen tells us: "More often than not, we are the exact opposite of electrified. It never ceases to impress me that we can measure a decline in energy and motivation almost instantly after a fantasy of wish fulfillment passes through a person's mind."

Plus: "By fooling our brains into thinking we're already successful, we lose motivation and energy to do what it takes to actually become successful."

In short: The positive fantasies by themselves feel good in the immediate term but are disastrous over the long run if we're serious about achieving our desired outcomes.

Let's look at what works!

MENTAL CONTRASTING

"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?"

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 a 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."

So, dreaming in and of itself can lead to the precise OPPOSITE results we're looking for.

But...

If we immediately contrast that ideal outcome with realities that stood in the way then magic happens!

Enter: Mental contrasting.

When we do *that*, rather than feel lethargic, we feel FIRED UP! (Technically, we feel a "necessity to act" that catalyzes us into doing the very things that will help us achieve our outcomes.)

There's an important caveat to this though: Our wish needs to be FEASIBLE. We need to think we can actually achieve it.

If we think we can achieve it, our motivation to take action immediately goes through the roof. If we *don't* think we can achieve it, our motivation actually drops below that of the pure dreamers.

"If you want to take action toward a desired future, then be sure to choose wishes that are challenging but still attainable for you. WOOP won't help you live more fully if your wish is to live on planet Neptune or become a billionaire within a year."

~ Gabriele Oettingen

And, as Oettingen tells us many times throughout the book, that's actually a REALLY good thing because sometimes we need to DISENGAGE from a dream.

It makes no sense to invest valuable energy into something we don't think we can attain. So, remember: Make sure you think your dreams are challenging but feasible and be honest about when your dreams are just too far out of your current reach to properly fire you up!

As per Oettingen: "Our study suggested that mental contrasting could help people do both things: engage even more forcefully when it made sense to engage, disengage even more forcefully when that made sense. It functioned as a self-regulation tool, helping people allocate their energy more efficiently so they didn't merely pursue wishes, but *wisely* pursued them."

IMPLEMENTATION INTENTIONS

"As time passed and Peter conducted more studies, he came to realize that forming a plan for how to attain a certain goal—what he termed the 'implementation intention'—had a more powerful effect if it took on the particular form of an 'if-then' statement: 'If situation *x* arises, then I will perform response *y*.' Let's suppose Jim feels inexplicably anxious when his regional manager stops by his office, so it's difficult for Jim to start up a conversation or ask a question. Jim's implementation intention might be 'If I become nervous talking to my regional manager, then I will remind myself that I'm the top-performing salesperson in the district and my sales have increased since last year'; or 'If I become nervous talking to my regional manager, then I will excuse myself for a moment, take a few deep breaths to calm down, and return to the conversation.'"

Implementation intentions.

They're huge and they are a key part of the WOOP strategy we're getting to.

(Sidenote: The guy who came up with this is Peter M. Gollwitzer—Gabriele's husband. That's awesome. Power couple!)

So, implementation intentions.

IF a situation arises, THEN you will do something.

Here's how Timothy Pychyl described it in his great little book *Solving the Procrastination Puzzle* ([see Notes](#)): "In short, implementation intentions are a powerful tool to move from a goal intention to an action.

As I have outlined in earlier chapters, these implementation intentions take the form of 'if... then' statements. The 'if' part of the statement sets out some stimulus for action. The 'then' portion describes the action itself. The issue here really is one of predecision. We are trying to delegate the control over the initiation of our behavior to a specified situation without requiring conscious decision.

IF I say to myself things like 'I'll feel more like doing this later' or 'I don't feel like doing this now,' THEN I will just get started on some aspect of the task."

The key here is that by identifying likely obstacles IN ADVANCE, we make what willpower researchers call a "predecision." We've pre-committed ourselves to an optimal path. By doing this (and getting in the habit of actually doing what we said we would do!), we're able to conserve precious willpower so we're not needing to squander energy every time we face the challenge.

Getting good at this is a REALLY good idea.

And now, it's time to get our super practical WOOP on!

"We would be wrong to jettison our dreams, just as we are wrong to blindly assume that simply dreaming something can make it so."

~ Gabriele Oettingen

LET'S GET OUR WOOP ON!

"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 effectively. Anyone can use it in his or her personal life for any purpose—for instance, to form closer relationships with others or improve health."

WOOP! (There it is. :)

This is the uber-practical, scientifically proven (!) way to bring your dreams to life.

Wish + Outcome + Obstacle + Plan.

WOOP! WOOP! WOOP!!

Wish: What do you want to see in your life personally or professionally? Imagine something challenging yet feasible you can achieve in a year, month, week or day.

Outcome: What is the #1 benefit you would experience as a result?

Obstacle: What obstacle *within you* stands in the way of achieving that wish? (Emphasis on "within you"!)

Plan: What can you do to get around that obstacle? What's the #1 most effective thing you could do?

Oettingen walks us through a really cool guided exercise to unpack these elements. We want to think in images and allow them to float thru our minds freely rather than being overly rational about it—allowing us to engage what she calls our "nonconscious minds."

She also provides a shorter written exercise.

Here it is: *"On a blank sheet of paper, name the wish in three to six words. Identify the best outcome (also in three to six words) and write it down. Now let your thoughts lead your pen, taking as much paper as you need. Then name your obstacle and write it down. Imagine the obstacle, again letting your thoughts wander and lead your writing. To create a plan, first write down one specific action you can take to overcome the obstacle. Write down the time and place where you believe the obstacle will arise. Then write down the if-then plan: 'If obstacle x occurs (when and where), then I will perform behavior y.' Repeat it once to yourself out loud."*

Let's do that now. (Time to move from *theory* to PRACTICE!!)

Name your **wish** in 3 to 6 words: _____

Identify the best **outcome**/benefit in 3 to 6 words: _____

Name your **obstacle**: _____

Now write down your if-then **plan**: IF _____ occurs
THEN I will _____.

WOOP!!!!

Remember: Science says this is extraordinarily powerful.

Remember x2: We can do this for *everything* in our lives.

WOOP AS A DAILY TOOL

"WOOP is 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."

~ Gabriele Oettingen

"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."

I'm sold! You?

Seriously. I'm already using this throughout my day and Alexandra and I are having fun adding some WOOP sauce to our lives. (And we look forward to teaching Emerson. :)

In the numerous WOOP interventions Gabriele and her team have conducted with a broad range of people (from young students to professionals), she often has them use a cool card that looks like this:

WISH	_____
OUTCOME	_____
OBSTACLE	_____
PLAN	
If _____	then I will _____

Here's an example for an exercise-based WOOP intervention (participants in the WOOP group got crazy better results than the controls):

Today's Exercise Wish: <i>jogging in the evening</i>	
Best Outcome:	<i>feeling balanced</i>
Obstacle:	<i>tired when I come home</i>
Plan: Overcome/Prevent/Seize Opportunity	
If <i>I come home tired at 7 p.m.</i>	<i>then I will put on my running shoes + go outside</i>
situation (when and where)	behavior

Oettingen also has an app you might love. Check it out [here](#).

For now, fill this little guy out and practice with big and little things throughout your day!

WISH	_____
OUTCOME	_____
OBSTACLE	_____
PLAN	
If _____	then I will _____

"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 even more-you'd be well advised to dispense with the trendy 'positive thinking' approach and give WOOP a try."

~ Gabriele Oettingen

TWO VITAL QUESTIONS

"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 very 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?"

These are the two vital questions for us to keep in mind:

What is your dearest wish?

What holds you back from achieving it?

Here's to embracing the new science of motivation that encourages us to hold *both* the positive wishes *and* the challenges as we enjoy the process of optimizing and actualizing!

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

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About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.