

# Positive Thinking vs Realistic Thinking

ASIM CHAUDHURI

## Introduction

‘Door is half open, or half closed?’ Answer to this age-old question may reveal a person’s outlook toward life, an innate personality trait. An optimistic view will reflect that the door is half open, whereas a pessimistic view will reflect the other option; both mean the same thing, it is the outlook, or the worldview, that differs.

The medical and psychological literature are deluged with the benefits of positive thinking (not to be confused with optimism, as discussed later) in reducing stress and improving well-being; in other words, it has a positive impact on mental and physical health. On the other hand, a pessimistic attitude (not to be confused with negative thinking) may lead to depression, stress, and anxiety, etc., which will affect the mental and physical health in a negative way.

But there is a third alternative that is sometimes lost, or overlooked, and that is realistic thinking. This article will discuss this way of thinking, and why it is better than the other options.

The article uses both the words optimism (positivity) and pessimism (negativity) with very specific meanings. Optimism is an inherent personality trait or attitude; an optimist tends to expect a positive outcome, whatever may be the situation. Positive thinking is a choice we make. In the same manner, pessimism is an inherent personal trait or attitude;

a pessimist tends to expect a negative outcome, whatever may be the situation. Negative thinking is also a choice we make. It is important to have these distinctions clear in mind before reading the following pages.

## What is negative thinking?

Before we get into elaborating the title subject, let us talk a little about negative thinking. Sometimes people see the cloud instead of the silver lining. That kind of negative thinking may have its place sometimes, but *only if it results in any action to avert the negative outcome*. (Then it becomes like realistic thinking.)

A good example of the benefit of this type of thinking is in the safety area. For instance, the rocket scientists harness their negative thinking to imagine potential disasters. They then correct their designs to avert the disasters. A whole new branch of engineering science called ‘Failure Mode and Effect Analysis’, or FMEA for short, has evolved from this line of thinking; in the design of aircrafts its beneficial effect is enormous. But this group of people is hardly different because it is not their life’s choice to think negative, they are paid to do so for public safety.

A close-to-home example is when a mother leaves her baby in the car, with the motor running, for a few minutes in a hot summer day and goes into a store to buy something. Once inside, she starts thinking that she probably has left the windows

closed, and the baby's life in that case will be in jeopardy. She starts thinking about all horrible outcomes in that situation; she has started thinking negative. Then she says to herself, 'All I have to do is go check on her.' That is action. Now her thinking tends towards realistic. She goes back and finds the windows closed, opens them immediately, and finds everything normal fortunately. There has been a positive consequence of a negative thought. *Negative thinking with no action is equivalent to negativity.*

It is not about eliminating negative thinking because, if used correctly, negative thinking can be a powerful tool for introspection and a motivator for some actions and thus move toward realistic thinking. Some psychologists even say that human brain has a built-in negativity bias. That may be true, because there is a proverb in Bengali, *Sneha chiradin amangal ashankā karey* (Love always apprehends danger). *It is all about integrating the negative thought into a perspective that acknowledges reality and takes constructive action while hoping for a positive outcome.*

### **What is positive thinking?**

Positive thinking can be defined in different ways, a unanimous definition among its researchers is still evolving. Let us become a little descriptive and say that it is a choice of thinking that finds silver linings in every dark cloud, even in challenging situations. But this kind of thinking is often abused by the inherently optimists by taking no action but a 'nothing-but-good-will-happen-to-me' approach.

Positive thinking is beneficial in improving mental well-being like self-awareness, self-esteem, self-regulation, emotional intelligence, motivation, as well as career growth, social relationships, and even

physical health as acknowledged by renowned healthcare institutions. But all these benefits are attributed to it when pitted against negativity, not negative thinking because it has been shown to have benefits when action is taken.

When positive thinking is not ignoring reality by critically thinking, recognising the dangers and challenges that lie ahead, which will make us much more likely to avoid them and achieve a positive outcome, positive thinking is already moving toward realistic thinking.

### **What is realistic thinking?**

When practising realistic thinking, one strives to analyze various situations objectively, in a balanced manner without any inherent bias of either positivity or negativity, and takes appropriate actions. Key characteristics of realistic thinking are as follows:

*Fact-based Evaluation:* Realistic thinkers base their beliefs and decisions on facts rather than emotions or biases. They seek evidence and gather data to support their viewpoints.

*Critical Analysis:* Those who practise realistic thinking engage in critical analysis. This involves not only answering the question 'What is happening?' but also exploring 'Why is it happening?' and 'What can I do about it?'

*Emotional Awareness:* Realistic thinkers are in tune with their emotions. They recognize the role feelings can play in decision-making but strive to keep their emotional responses in check to maintain objectivity.

*Acknowledgment of Uncertainty:* Accepting that not all outcomes can be predicted is essential for realistic thinking. This acceptance helps in preparing for various scenarios and reduces disappointment when events take unexpected turns.

*Focus on Control:* Realistic thinkers concentrate on what they can control, letting go of things beyond their influence. This focus channels energy into productive avenues rather than futile worry.<sup>1</sup>

Realistic thinking should not be confused with either positivity/negativity, or positive thinking/negative thinking-without-any action. Although the word ‘action’ is not mentioned while listing the realistic thinking characteristics, it is heavily implied.

### **How God-dependence contributes to this debate?**

If we are at that spiritual level when we think everything happening is a will of God, He is the only Doer, as Sri Ramakrishna thought, then the debate is moot. Then the actions we take as a result of our thinkings, positive, negative, or realistic, becomes God-intended. Very few of us, however, are at that level. But there are other ways of thinking that bring us the grace of God, and that is to remind us the age-old saying that ‘God helps those who help themselves’, or at least try to. According to what we have discussed earlier about actions following positive and realistic thinking (even after negative thinking under some circumstances), the saying also calls for concrete action. God’s help comes in various ways that we don’t always realize. There is a humorous story often used in this context:

A man with a serious illness was told by his doctor that he will die within an hour. He prayed, ‘God save me.’ A voice came, ‘Don’t worry, my son. I will save you.’ The man went back to his bed reassured. A surgeon called him to say, ‘I can operate and save you.’ The man said, ‘I won’t need you. God will save me.’ Then, an oncologist and radiotherapist, one after

the other, called to say, ‘I can save you.’ The man replied, ‘No, God will save me.’ After an hour, the man died, walked to God and said, ‘You said you’d save me, and here I am, as dead as a doornail.’ God replied, ‘You, dumbbell. I sent you a surgeon, an oncologist, and a radiotherapist, but you refused their services.’

The point of the joke is that if one has a serious illness and prays to God to save him, He expects the person to take some action and consult the best oncologist (or a surgeon, or a radiotherapist) and follow his advice.

The moral of the story is obvious. God does not want people without any action; He hates inaction. He sends help in unpredictable and strange ways to coax action, but people do not fully comprehend God’s intention. The story also means that God has given people limited free will and He wants them to use it. This is enunciated by Sri Ramakrishna in his poignant cow-tied-with-a-tether story.<sup>2</sup>

### **Putting these all together**

It has been shown that positive and negative thinking can morph into realistic thinking if there is action after critical thinking. But such thinking cannot match the situational analysis realistic thinking offers. It is obvious from the characteristics of the realistic thinking that it is preferable to either positive or negative thinking without any caveat about action.

A well-wisher often says to a person facing a problem in life, ‘Think positive, everything will be alright.’ If the conversation stops there, she is thinking of inculcating optimism, or positivity into the person, and it is doubtful that it will do any good. But that is the most common

comment heard from people; that is the polite thing to say. It will be a *faux pas* to say, ‘Think realistic’, particularly if the person is seriously ill. The comment to think positive may then sound patronizing to him, as he is going through a turbulent time, with anger, frustration, anguish, and all that. Patiently listening and validating his feelings and telling him he has every right to feel that way may ease his pain a little. Instead of asking him to think positive, she can say, ‘I feel your pain, keep your chin up and please let me know if I can help anyway to ease it,’ and mean it. She can, and should, tell the patient to stay positive when he is going to the operation theatre, because by then all thinking for him has ceased except optimistic, and has been transferred to the surgeon.

For a good analogy to show the difference in thinkings, let us assume that

three friends, an optimist, a pessimist, and a realist go yachting for fun. After a while they find the wind has subsided and changed direction, and the yacht won’t reach the destination before dark if it continues this way. The optimist hopes for wind to change soon, the pessimist laments that they will never make it, the realist calmly adjusts the sails and the yacht moves as desired. He has been thinking, ‘Why is it happening’, and ‘What can I do about it?’ After he bursts into action, the problem disappears.

Lot of people think an optimist is a positive thinker, but he is not unless he takes some action after critically analyzing the situation. The key is action. That is also God’s will, we can devote the fruit of the action to Him. If people feel happier with the word ‘positive’, maybe they will prefer the terminology ‘positive realism’. So, let’s all be positive realists. ■

#### REFERENCES

- 1 <https://www.saidhasyim.com/post/peak-mindset/understanding-the-psychology-of-realistic-thinking/>
- 2 Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master* (Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, 1970), p. 81.

- \* A resident of USA, Sri Asim Chaudhuri is an eminent writer and Vivekananda scholar. He is the author of several books on Swami Vivekananda.

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Vijnananandaji, would say—well, Sri Ramakrishna is a hard task master, you better take refuge in the Mother. Mother will give you protection. Swami Madhavanandaji was asked by a young monk a question: ‘Maharaj, sometimes we, young monks, commit mistakes and we feel shy and afraid to tell you all these

things very clearly. What should we do?’ He said ‘Why? Go to Mother’s temple at Belur Math and tell Her what wrong you have done.’ The monk asked: ‘Will Mother forgive us?’ ‘Yes. She is not an aunt. She is Mother. She must forgive.’ So, *mā bāchāo*—O, Divine Mother! Forgive me, protect me. ■

- \* Swami Medhasananda is the head of the Vedanta Society of Japan. The article is based on a lecture he delivered at the Vedanta Society of St. Louis on 19 October, 2004.