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Why do people aspire to quality?

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Keynote session 1: What is quality?

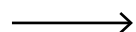
How can you personally aspire to quality? And how can you implement quality - in your work, in your relationships and in your lifestyle? You might have asked yourself these questions and you might have come up with a ready answer: think positive, look on the bright side. You might have told yourself: wish it, will it, then you will get it!

Positive thinking about the future may help us mentally explore our aspirations to quality and it surely feels good, at least for the moment. But positive future thinking can get in the way of actually achieving our aspirations to quality. It can spoil our chances and leave us forlorn and unhappy. If we want to realise our aspirations to quality, we must complement positive future thinking with a healthy dose of reality. We need to visualise both the aspired future and the inner obstacles that might stand in our way of realising our aspirations.

Why does positive future thinking hinder implementing our aspirations? More than twenty years of experimental research have shown that positive future thought by itself tempts people into feigning that they have attained their goals and that it saps the energy needed to accomplish our aspirations to quality. That is, positive future thoughts and mental images produce low effort directed at tackling our wishes and attaining our aspirations. These findings were observed with people of different ages, and for aspirations in many different life domains such as the interpersonal, academic, professional and the health domain. For example, the more positively university students imagined a successful transition into work life, the fewer job offers they had gotten in their field two years later, and the lower their salary was. Or, college students who studied for an important exam: the more positively they fantasised about their upcoming success, the worse they did. Or, take the interpersonal domain, the more positively students imagined getting together with a person they had a crush on, the less likely they were to indeed start the desired romantic relationship. Similarly, the more that hip replacement patients before surgery positively fantasised about a quality recovery, the less well they were able to move their new joint, the fewer steps they could walk, and the less well they recuperated after surgery as judged by their physical therapists. In general, the more people 'think positive' and imagine themselves achieving their quality aspirations, the less they seem to in fact implement them.

Positive future thinking can also affect people's mental health in unexpected ways. Thinking positively about the future puts people in a good mood but just for the moment. However, over time, positive future thought predicted greater depressive effect, in children and in adults alike, partly because people don't end up meeting their longer-term aspirations. By envisioning an idealised future, people do not prepare themselves for the potential hardships on the way to achieving that aspired future. Reality catches up with them.

Does this mean that from now on we all should stop looking on the bright side and simply focus on the dark side? No, do look on the bright side! However, you should combine your positive future dreams with identifying and then visualising the likely inner obstacles in your way. Future fantasies will give you the direction of acting. Identifying and visualising your obstacles will provide the energy so that you will be prepared to take on and overcome your obstacles on the way to fulfilling your quality aspirations. Such mental contrasting of the desired future and the inner obstacle standing in its way has been found to spur energy and effort to implement the aspirations to quality across age and life domains. For example, when they combined positive future thinking with a visualisation of possible obstacles, students provided quality in learning a new language and in excelling in mathematics, and adults provided quality work in areas as diverse as business negotiations and effective decision making, fighting cigarette habits and exercising more, taking responsibility and giving help to others in need.



Importantly, mental contrasting also helps people set priorities. When obstacles are surmountable, people pursue their desired future full force. When obstacles are formidable, however, people either adjust their wishes, postpone them to a better point in time, or let them go – in order to invest their energy into more promising endeavours.

Why does mental contrasting help people to better understand their quality aspirations and to implement them? The technique supports people in changing their behaviour in subtle, non-conscious ways, without that they even realize it. Specifically, mental contrasting builds strong mental links between the aspired future and the obstacles and between the obstacles and the behaviour that is effective to overcome the obstacles. It allows us to better recognise the obstacles in our path and it energises us. Finally, we will use setbacks as valuable information that helps us implement our quality aspirations. All these non-conscious processes triggered by mental contrasting then predict the exerted behaviour change.

Sometimes our obstacles are particularly sticky and challenging, such as when they are strong emotions or impulses, long held irrational beliefs, or ingrained bad habits. Mental contrasting can be combined with if-then plans or implementation intentions, a strategy discovered by Peter M. Gollwitzer. The combined exercise is called WOOP (Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan).

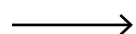
The first three steps of WOOP involve mental contrasting. WOO means finding a central Wish one feels passionate about and that one can in principle fulfil, and then identifying and visualizing both the desired Outcome of wish fulfilment and the inner Obstacle standing in the way of wish fulfilment. The final step, the Plan, is the intention implementation part. In the framework of mental contrasting, the plan comes in the following format: if... (obstacle), then I will... (action to take or thought to think in order to overcome obstacle).

The WOOP exercise is brief, five to ten minutes are enough to complete it. The exercise can be done anywhere, at home, at work, in a crowded bus. It can be done by focusing on trivial wishes and on life-changing wishes. It is good for short-term and for long-term aspirations. It helps in happy times to get even happier and in unhappy times to get unstuck. To go through WOOP, one needs to exclusively focus on the exercise. Also, in order for the imagery to develop it is best to go slow, to relax, and to not be interrupted – the world can now wait.

Learning the skill of WOOP helped children and adults to obtain clarity and get more involved in their work, in their relationships, and in managing their everyday chores. A host of intervention studies showed that WOOP helps children excel in school, patients manage their health conditions (such as stroke, back pain, schizophrenia), and stressed health care providers engage again in their work. WOOP reduced substance abuse and attenuated weight problems. In short, WOOP helped people to implement better quality in their life across age and life domains.

If you have five minutes to spare, you can try WOOP! Allow WOOP to unfold its non-conscious magic. You'll probably see yourself yielding more quality in many areas of your life. And the more you practice WOOP, the easier it will become. WOOP isn't a miracle cure for reaching success, but it is a loyal friend who will help you to aspire to and implement more quality in your life. You will understand which wishes are important for you and what is stopping you from living the life you want. Before you know it, you will be well on your way to achieving your quality aspirations – just by asking yourself: what is my dearest wish? And what holds me back from achieving it?

Learn how to use and apply WOOP, see www.woopmylife.org and the WOOP app.



For future reading

- Oettingen, G. & Sevincer, A. T. (2018). Fantasy about the future as friend and foe. In G. Oettingen, A. T. Sevincer, & P. M. Gollwitzer (Eds.), *The psychology of thinking about the future* (pp. 127–149). New York, NY: Guilford.
- Kappes, A., Singmann, H., & Oettingen, G. (2012). Mental contrasting instigates goal pursuit by linking obstacles of reality with instrumental behavior. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 48*, 811–818. doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2012.02.002
- Wittleder, S., Kappes, A., Krott, N. R., Jay, M., & Oettingen, G. (2019). Mental contrasting spurs energy by changing implicit evaluations of obstacles. *Motivation Science*. doi:10.1037/mot0000140

About the author

Gabriele Oettingen is a professor of psychology at New York University and the University of Hamburg who studies thinking about the future and the control of cognition, emotion and behaviour. Her work on the perils of positive thinking and on mental contrasting is published in social and personality psychology, developmental and educational psychology, in health and clinical psychology, in organisational and consumer psychology, as well as in neuropsychological and medical journals. In her recent work, Gabriele Oettingen analyses a phenomenon she calls paradoxical knowing, which is a shortcut to knowledge leading to antisocial and extreme behaviour.

Her first trade book, **RETHINKING POSITIVE THINKING: Inside the New Science of Motivation** has been published by Current, an imprint of Penguin Random House, in October 2014 (for more information, see www.woopmylife.org).