



Defensive Pessimism, Anxiety, and the Complexity of Evaluating Self-Regulation

Julie K. Norem*

Department of Psychology, Wellesley College

Abstract

Defensive pessimism is a motivated cognitive strategy that helps people manage their anxiety and pursue their goals. Individuals who use defensive pessimism set low expectations, and play through extensive mental simulations of possible outcomes as they prepare for goal-relevant tasks and situations. Research on a variety of phenomena, from self-handicapping to stereotype threat, demonstrates the potential effectiveness of defensive pessimism as a self-regulation strategy. Review of this research provides an illustration of the complexity of self-regulation efforts, because understanding how and why defensive pessimism works requires an integrated understanding the role of traits, motivations, and self structures within the individual, the resultant goals toward which strategies are directed, and the particular constraints of different situations and cultural contexts.

Defensive pessimism is a strategy that can help people manage their anxiety so that it does not interfere with – and may even facilitate – their efforts to reach their goals. To paraphrase Garrison Keilor’s description of the power of Powdermilk Biscuits, defensive pessimism helps anxious people ‘get up and do what needs to be done’. Research on defensive pessimism intersects with work on mental simulation, goal setting, rumination, positive psychology, and stereotype threat. In a brief review of this research, I will consider how and why defensive pessimism can be effective, its potential costs and benefits relative to other kinds of strategies, and its implications for our broader understanding of optimism, adaptation, and self-regulation. I will argue that research on defensive pessimism demonstrates the need to consider the structures of self and personality, individuals’ ability to respond creatively and effectively to those structures in different contexts, and the role of strategy-context fit in order to understand the complexity of self-regulation and effective adaptation.

What Is a Strategy?

Strategies such as defensive pessimism are called ‘self-regulatory strategies’ because their purpose is to help us control or regulate ourselves (Baumeister

& Vohs, 2004; Hoyle, 2006). We use self-regulatory strategies when we go on a diet, work on a presentation for clients, or try to be more patient with our children. Strategies describe coherent *patterns* of emotions, thoughts, motivations, and behavior as they unfold during the process of pursuing goals (Cantor, 1990; Norem, 1989). Although the steps of a particular strategy can be described without reference to the goals or characteristics of the individual using that strategy, strategy coherence is often highlighted only when we consider those factors, because it follows from an individual's understanding of what he or she is trying to do in a given context. That understanding, in turn, flows from prior experiences, self-knowledge, and other aspects of personality structure and dynamics.

Using this definition highlights several other distinctive features of strategies, one of which is that strategies describe processes that happen over time. Strategies are different from transitory states ('I'm nervous when I drive on this road') or chronic, unvarying traits ('I'm a very nervous person.'). Although they may stem from an individual's recognition of either a state or a trait, strategies represent that person's ongoing attempts to respond in ways that fit his or her individual goals in a particular context: 'Because I'm nervous driving on this road *and* I want to be as safe as possible, I turn off the radio, take some deep breaths, and ask my passengers to stay quiet *so that* I can direct all my attention to the road.' From this example, it is also clear that strategies are influenced by the situations people choose (or find themselves in), because those situations will influence what goals are relevant and what obstacles must be overcome.

The inclusion of more than one process in the description of a strategy is based on the assumption that those processes in conjunction have an effect that is not well captured by looking at individual processes in isolation. Thus, in the end, strategies describe and predict something beyond what is described and predicted by looking at each piece of the process independently.

Why Do Anxious People Need a Strategy?

Anxious people are not unique in needing strategies: everyone uses strategies to regulate their emotions, motivations, thoughts, and behavior. Anxious people are distinct in that they need strategies specifically directed toward managing their anxiety; obviously, if one is not anxious, one has little need of anxiety-management strategies. In other words, anxious people – even when they seem from the outside to be in the same situation as nonanxious people – are in a very different situation because of their anxiety; as a consequence, the same strategies that work well for nonanxious people in a given situation may fail miserably for anxious individuals.

When we are anxious, the typical response is to avoid or run away from whatever causes that anxiety. Often, however, what makes us anxious is also something we very much want: for example, a date with the attractive

person across the room. It is hard to get a date if one consistently flees the presence of potential dating partners. Thus, anxious people need a strategy to help them control their urge to flee and instead to stay in the situations that are relevant to achieving their goals. To complicate things, beyond simply staying in a situation, they also need to figure out a way to control their anxiety so that it does not interfere with acting effectively in that situation. Anxiety is famously disruptive of many kinds of behavior: it can cause us to stammer, turn red, have trouble concentrating, forget things we have just learned, and trip over our own feet.

What Is Defensive Pessimism?

Defensive pessimism is the strategy of setting low expectations (being pessimistic) and then thinking through, in concrete and vivid detail, all the things that might go wrong as one prepares for an upcoming situation or task. For example, consider Sarah, who is anxious about traveling and uses defensive pessimism to manage that anxiety. She imagines the following chain of mishaps when anticipating an upcoming business trip: she arrives at the airport late because of heavy traffic, she has to pay excess baggage charges for an overly full suitcase; she is then delayed at security because of improperly packaged liquids in carry-on luggage, she is frustrated and bored because of flight delays, and – if she makes it that far – she faints on the plane from hunger because the airlines no longer provide meals. Even if she arrives more or less intact, the mental scenario suggests, she will find that her suitcase – containing the suit she had planned to wear for an important business presentation, as well as the presentation itself – has been lost by the airline, and that her reservation was inadvertently cancelled at her hotel.

Why Does Defensive Pessimism Work to Regulate Anxiety?

Many people would feel either exhausted or anxious just from reading the description of Sarah reviewing all of those negative possibilities. Yet for the person using defensive pessimism, rehearsing this litany of potential disasters leads to effective action that can mitigate the negative effects of anxiety on performance. Indeed, understanding the relationship between anxiety and defensive pessimism is fundamental to understanding how and why the strategy can work well. To resist the impulse to avoid situations that make us anxious, or the immobilization that can result when we simultaneously desire to approach and to avoid a goal, one needs some strategy for managing anxiety so that it does not interfere with doing what needs to be done.

Negative reflections help defensive pessimists to focus on imagined negative events (often perceived as ‘disasters’ through the negative lens of anxiety) in ways that promote actions designed to prevent those disasters.

In the example above, Sarah has envisioned *specific* negative possibilities, and each possibility points to concrete steps that can be taken to avoid its realization. Sarah can take less heavily traveled routes to the airport, and leave early to avoid arriving late; she can go online to check restrictions on carry-on luggage and weight limits for checked luggage, and she can double check the weight of her suitcase before she leaves home. She can stock up on light reading and snacks to occupy her before and during her flight. Finally, she can either carry an extra suit and an extra copy of her presentation in her carry-on luggage, or she can send those backups ahead to the hotel when she calls to confirm her reservation.

Sarah's actions in this example address the specific mental scenarios she generated and move her closer to the overall goal of having a successful trip. Many people who are anxious about traveling look for ways to avoid having to do so, even if it means limiting their career opportunities. In contrast, Sarah confronts her anxiety and works to make her trip a success by using defensive pessimism to channel the negative thinking prompted by anxiety into specific plans that lead to specific actions. Indeed, Sarah's approach, although effortful, and perhaps hedonically somewhat unpleasant, matches well with results from research on goal pursuit, which suggests that people are more likely to succeed if they break down large goals into specific and concrete smaller pieces, called 'implementation intentions', that provide a clear guide for translating abstract motivations into action (Gollwitzer, 1999). Defensive pessimism helps Sarah to get from 'I want. ...' to 'this is what I need to do in order to get. ...'

Why Cannot a Defensive Pessimist Be More Like an Optimist?

Several studies have contrasted people using defensive pessimism with those using a strategy called 'strategic optimism'. Strategic optimists do not feel anxious or out of control in performance situations, they set high expectations, and they avoid thinking very much about what might happen, whether good or ill. They do what they feel they need to do, without the effort of mentally simulating various possible outcomes (*but*, as we will consider later, they also begin without the defensive pessimists' anxiety).

Different personalities, different strategies

People who use defensive pessimism reliably report greater levels of trait anxiety and neuroticism and lower self-esteem, they often report more negative affect generally, they have more negative expectations for their performance, they report more goal conflict, and they generate more negative potential outcomes and plans than those who use strategic optimism (Cantor, Norem, Niedenthal, Langston, & Brower, 1987; Norem, 2001;

Norem & Cantor, 1986a; Norem & Illingworth, 1993; Sanna, 1996). Defensive pessimists are more pessimistic about future outcomes even when they have done as well as optimists in the past.

There is also evidence that defensive pessimists are simultaneously motivated by the desire to avoid failure and the motivation to achieve success. They focus on specific performance-oriented goals that include both avoiding failure and doing well, and they have a higher ratio of negative to positive self knowledge than strategic optimists (Elliot & Church, 2003; Yamawaki, Tschanz, & Feick, 2004). Perhaps as a result, they are also likely to feel conflicted, particularly in situations where they value the success that might be obtained.

By themselves, those results do little to demonstrate that defensive pessimism is more than a generally negative view of self and the world; this raises the question of why those using the strategy cannot just 'lighten up', especially given that they typically perform as well as the strategic optimists and would seem to have plenty of reasons to be positive. Indeed, American culture highly values optimism, and there are hundreds of studies that demonstrate that different kinds of optimism are related to positive outcomes. Thus, the idea that a pessimistic approach might be useful may seem counterintuitive from the outset, and the conclusion that defensive pessimists need to be 'cured' with optimism may be almost automatic.

Yet, just as saying 'hey, relax' to an anxious person rarely helps, the research evidence makes clear that simply trying to be more optimistic will not work for defensive pessimists. Experimental manipulations designed to make defensive pessimists more optimistic lead to *poorer* performance (Norem & Cantor, 1986b). Similarly, in a recent study, manipulations designed to get participants to feel that future successes were subjectively closer than future failures lead to poorer performance for defensive pessimists (Sanna, Chang, Carter, & Small, 2006).

Indeed, attempts to disrupt or make more optimistic any component of their strategy seem to interfere with the defensive pessimists' performance, and lower their satisfaction after the fact. When we distracted defensive pessimists prior to a performance task in a laboratory study, they scored lower, and felt less in control and more anxious than when we had them work through all the possible outcomes they could come up with beforehand. (Further analyses showed that anxiety indeed mediated these results.) In a conceptual replication of the laboratory study, we prompted defensive pessimists to think through what they were doing as they worked on their 'real-life' goals over the course of several weeks, and they reported even more progress in that condition than when we did not reinforce their strategy (Norem & Illingworth, 1993).

Both thinking positively and relaxing prior to performance lead to poorer performance for defensive pessimists compared to thinking through negative possible outcomes, as shown in a study using visualization techniques

that mimicked the defensive pessimists negative reflectivity, the strategic optimists' distraction/relaxation, or a third approach focused on thinking through only positive possible outcomes (Spencer & Norem, 1996). Other research has shown that defensive pessimists prefer to engage in 'prefactual' thinking prior to a task or performance (Sanna, 1998). Prefactual thinking refers to mental simulation of possible events before they actually occur. In contrast, strategic optimists prefer not to simulate prefactuals, but do engage in downward 'counterfactuals' when their performance is disappointing. Counterfactual thinking involves thinking about how things could have turned out differently than they actually did, and downward counterfactuals are mental simulations of alternative outcomes that are more negative than those that occurred. Generating downward counterfactuals after a disappointing outcome is often a 'mood-repair' strategy: thinking about how things could have been worse can help us to feel better. Both defensive pessimists and strategic optimists perform best when allowed to pursue (or avoid) mental simulation according to their preferences, and the performance of both groups suffers when they use the other groups' preferred simulation type.

Trying to cheer up defensive pessimists does not work well either: two studies have shown that while it is *possible* to put defensive pessimists in a better mood, doing so leads to poorer performance (Norem & Illingworth, 2004; Sanna, 1998). Sanna found that defensive pessimists engage in less prefactual thinking when they are in a more positive mood, but that their performance suffers as a result. Defensive pessimists appear to use their negative feelings as a cue to work harder, which then typically leads to better performance.

Positive negativity

Negative affect and negative thinking function as positive motivation for defensive pessimists. Unlike rumination (when one has repetitive negative thoughts about the past), or catastrophizing (when negative thoughts about a particular circumstance spiral out of control to include life and self more generally), the defensive pessimist's negative reflections are directed toward the future, and focus on potential negative scenarios that are directly relevant to the situation or goal he or she wants to approach. Rather than ruminating about how anxiety has disrupted performance in the past, or becoming otherwise trapped in thought, the defensive pessimist is able to shift emphasis from anxious feelings to thoughts about possible specific problems, and then to actions to prevent those problems from derailing progress. The focus on the future rather than the past, along with the defensive pessimists' ability to think in concrete terms that readily suggest concrete action, help to explain how defensive pessimists do not seem to be at much risk for depression, even though their perspective can be quite negative (Hosogoshi, 2006; Norem, 2006; Showers & Ruben, 1990; Tomaya, 2005).

Considering Strategy Effectiveness

Assessing the effectiveness of a strategy turns out to be more complicated than it might initially appear. The most obvious way to do so is to compare relevant outcomes for groups using different strategies; yet choosing which groups to compare on which variables can have a substantial influence on the ultimate evaluation of effectiveness. When studying a more pessimistic strategy, perhaps the most salient comparison group is those who use a more optimistic strategy, and as noted above, much of the research on defensive pessimism compares it to strategic optimism. The results of those studies typically (although not always) show that defensive pessimists do as well as strategic optimists on objective performance outcomes. Although defensive pessimists are far from uniformly grim, and often report positive emotions in line with those reported by strategic optimists, they also almost always report more negative affect and greater stress than strategic optimists.

Comparing groups

In all likelihood, if one were to do a simply tally of outcomes that have been measured in past research, the strategic optimists would 'win', even though the contest would be closer than much of the research on optimism more generally might lead one to predict. Before awarding the laurel wreath in strategy effectiveness to strategic optimists, however, there are other questions to ask. The first is whether those using defensive pessimism were running the same race as those using strategic optimism. Referring to the discussion above, the answer would seem to be 'no', in that these two groups start in different positions, and face different obstacles. Defensive pessimists start with the task of managing their anxiety, which is not an issue for the strategic optimists. Figuratively speaking, it is as if the strategic optimists are running on a clear course, while the defensive pessimists run the same distance, but have to jump over hurdles on the way.

Looking across a variety of research reveals how assessment of strategy effectiveness can change depending on the extent to which one considers where strategy users start out, and to whom they are compared. An early study on defensive pessimism reported that, even though they did well initially (during their first year in college), defensive pessimists appeared to fall behind strategic optimists by their third year (Cantor & Norem, 1989). This interpretation was based on data that showed that defensive pessimists' average grade point average (GPA) was slightly lower in the third year than the strategic optimists', and they reported significantly more stress. At that time, we interpreted these results as indicating the potential for the costs of defensive pessimism to accumulate in harmful ways over time, relative to strategic optimism.

Defensive pessimism may indeed have costs that accumulate over time, but other considerations and further research also suggest alternative

interpretations. The early study did not control for initial levels of stress or performance in the first wave of data, so concluding that the defensive pessimists' stress levels rose and their GPAs dropped over their years in college was not based on direct tests of change over time. If we knew that the defensive pessimists started out more stressed than the strategic optimists, we might focus on the fact that the defensive pessimists' average grades were still quite high, despite their considerable stress and anxiety. The higher stress levels would then be seen as contributing to the need for defensive pessimism, rather than an unfortunate consequence of the strategy itself. This perspective suggests an alternative highly relevant comparison group for considering the effectiveness of defensive pessimism: those who are comparably anxious but do not use defensive pessimism to manage that anxiety.

A more recent study takes this perspective using slightly different variables, along with statistical techniques that evaluate the specific trajectories of change over time, for individuals and for groups (Norem & Andreas Burdzovic, 2007). This study followed three groups of students from their first year in college through the year after they graduated. The three groups were strategic optimists, defensive pessimists, and a group of students who were just as anxious as the defensive pessimists (and both defensive pessimists and this third group were significantly higher in anxiety than the strategic optimists), but did not use defensive pessimism. Growth-curve analysis of self-esteem, measured at several times during the period of the study, revealed some informative patterns (Singer & Willett, 2003). Initially, defensive pessimists and the other anxious group had roughly equivalent levels of self-esteem, and both groups had significantly lower self-esteem than the strategic optimists. Overall, there were significant changes in self-esteem over the college years. Most importantly, however, the groups showed *different patterns* of self-esteem change over time. The strategic optimists did not change much at all: they started out with high self-esteem, and their evaluations of themselves remained high throughout college. The defensive pessimists showed significant improvements in self-esteem as time went on, until they had almost (but not quite) reached the levels of the strategic optimists. In marked contrast, the other anxious group showed significant *decreases* in self-esteem over time. Defensive pessimists thus ended up with significantly higher self-esteem – and, indeed, were higher on virtually all outcome measures in the study – than the anxious students who did not use defensive pessimism.

Other research supports the conclusion that defensive pessimists are better off than other anxious individuals. Socially anxious defensive pessimists are less likely to avoid social interactions than other socially anxious individuals (Schoneman, 2002). Engaging in social situations is a crucial step for the social development of those who are shy or socially anxious, because social skills and relationships are unlikely to develop in the absence of social interaction (Melchior & Cheek, 1990).

Anxiety about failure and avoidance motivation often lead individuals to adopt self-handicapping strategies. Self-handicapping is when individuals behave so as to avoid painfully self-incriminating attributions for negative outcomes. In other words, self-handicapping strategies preemptively provide an excuse if things go wrong. Socially anxious people may drink too much at a party, both to quell their anxiety, and to be able to excuse clumsy or embarrassing behavior: in effect, their behavior is designed to promote the conclusion that 'it wasn't *me*, it was the booze'. More subtly, procrastination can be self-handicapping in that, while it is unlikely to lead to good performance, it provides an explanation for poor performance that is more desirable than the alternative conclusion that one is simply unintelligent or without ability.

Although it can help individuals to avoid conclusive evidence that they are incapable and can regulate anxiety to some extent, the obvious drawback to self-handicapping is its probable negative effects on performance – particularly in the long run. Several studies have now compared defensive pessimists to self-handicappers. Both strategies can be seen as self-protective (Martin, Marsh, & Debus, 2001). Yet, though they share anxiety and fear of failure, defensive pessimists are more engaged in self-improvement and working toward positive goals than self-handicappers, and they typically perform significantly better (Elliot & Church, 2003; Eronen, Nurmi, & Salmela Aro, 1998). In a study of self-regulated learning among seventh graders, defensive pessimists were significantly higher in 'volitional self-control' than self-handicapping students (and control students), and they were better able to manage distractions and competing demands than self-handicappers. Defensive pessimists gave stronger endorsement to the present 'good student' self than the self-handicappers, and said that being a good student in the future, and avoiding becoming a bad student, were more important to them than the self-handicappers did. Defensive pessimists felt significantly more efficacious about remaining good students and not becoming bad students than the self-handicappers (Garcia, 1995).

When comparing strategic optimists to defensive pessimists, it is easy to find that defensive pessimists experience more negative emotion than the strategic optimists, and tempting to consider that negative emotion as a cost of the strategy itself, either in the sense that the negative mental rehearsal defensive pessimists use may temporarily exacerbate negative feelings, or in the sense that the strategy 'fails' to eliminate negative feelings. Comparing defensive pessimists to other anxious individuals who do not use defensive pessimism, however, reveals the considerable benefits of defensive pessimism for those whose goal in many situations must include the reality of the potential for their anxiety to disrupt their progress. From this perspective, there are considerable costs of strategic optimism for those who are anxious, in that the evidence indicates that defensive pessimists do significantly worse when they try to be more like strategic optimists; and defensive pessimism clearly 'wins' against self-handicapping.

Considering goals, outcomes, and context

As mentioned above, one way of evaluating strategy effectiveness is to compare outcomes across different groups of individuals who use different strategies. Defining strategies in terms of the goals individuals pursue, however, also leads to examining what outcomes are important to the individuals employing those strategies, the situations in which they are employed, and the extent to which there is what Higgins has called 'regulatory fit' between the way people engage in an activity and their interests in that activity (Higgins, 2005). In Higgins's terms, defensive pessimists have developed a strategy that meshes well with their dual motivation to avoid failure (a prevention focus), while pursuing achievement.

For defensive pessimists, the primary goal is not avoiding negative thoughts about the self or the transitory negative affect associated with thinking about negative possibilities. Instead, as Sanna (1998) argues, they are more focused on the preparatory, as opposed to affective, functions of their strategy. Often it is necessary to tolerate negative affect in order to achieve important goals; and sometimes being prepared to prevent negative outcomes is the most salient goal in a particular context, while minimizing negative affect is decidedly secondary (Kelly et al., 1990; Norem, 2007). As an example, one study found that defensive pessimists worried more about severe acute respiratory syndrome during an outbreak than strategic optimists, *but* they also actively engaged in more preventative efforts as recommended by public health authorities (Chang & Sivam, 2004). (During the first peaks of the HIV/AIDS epidemic among homosexual men in the USA, the Gay Men's Health Cooperative found similar results among young gay men; those results were circulated to interested parties, but have not been published.) In situations such as these, where possible negative outcomes are relatively likely and/or relatively serious, defensive pessimism may be a particularly good fit.

Contexts themselves often exert considerable influence on the nature of the goals individuals pursue and the relative importance of different outcomes. Different groups within the dominant cultural context of the USA often face different obstacles to achievement. One example of this phenomenon is elegantly demonstrated in the literature on stereotype threat. Stereotype threat describes a condition in which members of a negatively stereotyped group fear confirming that stereotype, and in the process, actually become more likely to perform in ways that fit that stereotype (Steele & Aronson, 1995). One study found, however, that African American women using defensive pessimism actually performed *better* on a math test under stereotype threat, while African American women who did not use defensive pessimism demonstrated the typical effects of stereotype threat, performing worse under stereotype threat than under no threat conditions (Perry, 2007).

This suggests that context can create conditions for members of particular groups for which defensive pessimism may be a useful and adaptive response.

A large-scale study of African American college retention rates provides some converging evidence for that argument. Researchers found that African American students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) were significantly more likely to use defensive pessimism than those at historically black colleges and universities. Those students who used defensive pessimism had retention rates comparable to white students at the PWIs, while African American students who did not use defensive pessimism had significantly lower retention rates (Brower & Ketterhagen, 2004). The authors of the study argue that the African American students at PWIs had to work harder to negotiate between academic and social demands. Unlike white students, they did not have the 'luxury' of short-term failure because of stereotype threat. Facing those external conditions, a strategy that converts anxiety to effort with a focus on preventing negative outcomes seems not only useful, but necessary. In contrast, assuming that optimism is a solution seems both counter to current evidence and blithely dismissive of the experience of those in these situations.

Cultural context can also influence factors such as the relative importance of 'universal' motivations such as self-enhancement, and consequently alter the balance of costs and benefits for different strategies. Research suggests, for example, that self-enhancement is less prevalent and self-criticism more prevalent among the Japanese than among Canadian and American Caucasians, just as typically is the case for defensive pessimists as opposed to strategic optimists (Heine, Takata, & Lehman, 2000). In a cultural context that frowns on self-promotion, strategies designed to facilitate self-enhancement and positive self-presentation may evoke negative reactions from others, just as pessimism can do in the USA. Chang has argued that the cultural sensibilities of Asian Americans are likely to make defensive pessimism an especially appropriate strategy, and he finds that pessimism is associated with more problem-solving among Asian Americans (Chang, 1996).

In contrast, it may be that American emphasis on individual outcomes generally, and positive affect and self-evaluation specifically, underestimates other kinds of costs of more optimistic strategies. Prominent corporate leaders whose severance packages ensure financial security are notable examples of successful, self-confident optimists, but seldom does the success of their subordinates get included in an evaluation of the benefits of their optimism, even in cases where pension funds are devastated or companies go bankrupt. National Aeronautics and Space Administration is just one example of an American institution that has ignored or punished those who were considered too negative because they tried to direct attention to problems or difficulties, to the detriment of the Challenger mission, and the reputation of current astronauts.

Defensive Pessimism, Adaptation and What Is ‘Normal’

The above discussion does not imply that one cannot evaluate the effectiveness of self-regulation strategies. It does, however, testify to the complexity of doing so. We need approaches to the study of self-regulation that recognize that strategies are not randomly distributed to those who use them, but result from intra-individual structures and processes, as well as external constraints and affordances that vary across individuals. Personality, self-concept, and aspects of an individual’s social identity will influence what strategies they need to employ toward what personal goals, and how those strategies work across different situations and contexts. Strategies are unlikely to be universally maladaptive or effective; rather, their costs and benefits are likely to depend on who is using them under what circumstances.

There is a tendency in some areas of psychology to consider adaptation primarily in terms of two groups, who are described as if those who are ‘normal’ and well adapted are a monolithic entity that contrasts starkly with another group, that must, virtually by definition, suffer from pathology or serious deficit. Optimists, those who self-enhance, and those with high self-esteem are contrasted with ‘depressives’. We should be wary of neglecting the reality that optimism, self-esteem, anxiety, and a host of other person characteristics show significant variation well within the normal range of individual difference. Among individuals who do not suffer from pathology, we should expect to find a wide range of individual understandings and creative responses to self and world. Results from research on defensive pessimism remind us that there are multiple pathways to successful adaptation that reflect the varied intrapsychic, interpersonal, social, and cultural circumstances to which people adapt.

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Short Biography

Julie K. Norem’s training and research interests hover around the fluid boundaries between personality and social psychology. She has spent 20 years exploring defensive pessimism, its implications for the adaptation of those who use it, and the ways in which it stems from and influences other aspects of self-concept and personality. Her book *The Positive Power of Negative Thinking* (Basic Books, 2001) summarizes some of the research

she has done, which has appeared in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, the *Journal of Personality*, and the *Journal of Research in Personality*. Her current research examines the relationship between impostor feelings, self-knowledge and adjustment. She holds the Margaret Hamm Professorship in Psychology at Wellesley College, where she is department chair, and has taught for 15 years. Prior to coming to Wellesley, she taught at Northeastern University. She received her AB from the University of Chicago, and her PhD in Psychology from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Endnote

* Correspondence address: Department of Psychology, Wellesley College, 106 Central Street, Wellesley, MA 02481, USA. Email: jnorem@wellesley.edu.

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