

Chapter 5



How Investing in the Future Pays Off Today

AJ'S MOTHER, Mary, an immigrant from Ghana, cleaned Jim Clifton's apartment building in the Georgetown section of Washington, D.C. Some Saturdays, Mary brought AJ along. He usually read while his mom worked, but one day AJ started asking Jim questions. One of the first: "Where do you work?"

Jim, the CEO of Gallup, told AJ about his job, and AJ liked what he heard. "How can I get a job there?" he asked. "Well, why don't you come over and apply?" Jim said.

A week or so later, AJ was in Jim's D.C. office for an interview, while his mother sat nervously outside. Jim opened the interview with a straightforward question: "What do you know about Gallup?" And that's when AJ's homework paid off. He'd googled Jim, he'd googled the company's name, he knew the history of Gallup and where it was headed, and he had lots of questions. As Jim later said, "This guy was going like hell to get a job here. I've asked the same question of plenty of applicants who answered, 'Not much, can you tell me about it?'"

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Those applicants didn't get a job, but AJ did. "The interview went well," Jim told him. "Let's go get you some Gallup gear to wear. Then you finish middle school, high school, and college. When you graduate, your job will be waiting. Until then, when you're off school, you can work here as a junior analyst."

That's how, in the summer of 2010, at age nine, AJ became Gallup's youngest "employee," joining more than two thousand colleagues around the globe. And he became a kid on a mission. Until then, he'd been a middling student at a middling school, with vague dreams of being a radio announcer or an NBA star. Now, as he wore his Gallup gear around school, his effort skyrocketed and his grades became nearly perfect. At Jim's request, AJ reported in periodically. A typical email:

Hello Mr. Clifton, I just wanted to give you an update on my progress in school. I aced my first math and language arts quizzes and I think I aced my first social studies quiz also. I'll keep in touch.

AJ was interning at the Gallup offices in June 2011 when I asked him to help me with some online research. We had a few email exchanges and phone conversations to set up the project. He was engaging, charming, and focused. But what really stood out was his ability to ask detailed, pointed questions. As we talked, I imagined him developing a picture, a clear image of what I needed.

I have given assignments to thousands of students, and I have time-tested expectations for what they can produce. AJ exceeded even my expectations for graduate students. He searched for and downloaded all of the available articles and summarized them succinctly. Days before his deadline, AJ delivered.

As he headed back to school in the fall, AJ told Jim, "I think I need to come in over Christmas break to work on some projects." AJ's habit of looking toward the future makes him one of my favorite examples

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of how hope for tomorrow changes your life today. The immediacy of return on your investment in the future is what sets hope apart from willpower, optimism, and wishing.

Connecting Today to Tomorrow

Can we inspire hope in people who don't have a Jim Clifton in their lives, no CEO of a major company ready to shape their future? Let's go back to middle school to find out. In the spring of 2009, a counselor from the University of Michigan visited a local school to give a talk about college and careers. He spoke to two groups of seventh-grade science students—295 students in all. Both groups (to which students were assigned randomly) saw a slide presentation about the university, the campus, and college majors. The second part of the talk featured real-world data about adult earnings. One group saw a graph describing the step-wise increase in salary by level of education in the state of Michigan. (Based on 2006 census numbers, the typical Michigander who graduated from high school earned \$31,500 a year. Those with four years of college earned a median income of \$50,900 a year.) The second group saw a graph summarizing the earnings of actors, athletes, and musicians on the 2008 Forbes Celebrity 100 list. (Musicians averaged the highest, at \$63.7 million, although Oprah Winfrey, the highest-paid entertainer in the world, earned \$275 million that year.)

In truth, the career information was part of a psychology experiment designed by two researchers, Mesmin Destin and Daphna Oyserman. Oyserman, professor of psychology at the University of Michigan, had previously identified a disconnect between students' thinking about the future ("I will go to college and then become a doctor") and the behavioral choices (completing and turning in assignments, preparing for exams) they were making about school and schoolwork. Why did such high expectations so often fail to turn into real achievement?

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We can put numbers to this disconnect. Most American high school students (90 percent or more) believe they are college-bound, but fewer than 75 percent actually graduate from high school. Only 60 percent of *those* graduates attend college, and, in turn, only 40 percent of *those* college freshmen will ultimately graduate with a degree. By my calculations, about one of every five high schoolers who say they will seek higher education actually graduates from college. This expectation-performance gap is bad news for our young people and for our country.

Destin (now a professor of psychology at Northwestern University) wanted to devise an intervention that would help Detroit seventh graders map out their future and navigate the real barriers to success in school. The purpose of his experiment was to test future thinking associated with education (sparked by the graph of income levels by education) against future thinking that was disconnected from education (the graph of income by celebrity). Once the classroom presentation was over, the science teachers (who had not attended and hence were considered “blind” to the experiment) gave the students an extra-credit homework assignment related to information covered in their regular science class.

As Destin later told me, even he was surprised by the results. The students in the first group, who were shown an explicit link between education and income, were nearly eight times more likely than the second group to complete and turn in the optional assignment the next day. *Eight times*. It’s as if they suddenly saw education as a real path to the good future they wanted. Knowing the way to a solid job that paid \$50,000 a year gave these twelve- and thirteen-year olds more energy and guidance for current effort than all the fantasy fortunes of Jay-Z, LeBron James, and other icons they followed in the media.

Talking with Destin helped me realize that there is a distinction between thinking that you are college-bound (an idea that we now drum into kids) and realizing that your success in life depends on

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how well you do in school *today*. As he put it, these students from the Detroit middle school started “seeing schoolwork as an investment, not a chore.” Like AJ, they were turned on by a vision of their future selves in a good job. When we see a direct connection between the future we want and our attitudes and behaviors today, our commitment and effort soar.

Later on, it hit me that Destin’s findings ran counter to my operating instructions from childhood on. See, I graduated from “Our Lady of Perpetually Delayed Gratification.” I can still see De La Salle Brother Bernard standing at the front of the gym: “Gentlemen, to be successful in the future, you must sacrifice right now.” I knew that how well I would do in sports, school, work, and life depended on my suffering just a little bit every day. Throwing one hundred baseballs today would improve my pitching on game day seventy-two hours from now. Forgoing a paying job after college to go to graduate school would lead to more money down the road. Working insane hours in my first job would make me more competitive for a better job, one with more freedom and less travel.

Delayed gratification and the willpower it took to sustain it did help me succeed. (Stay tuned for more about willpower. It has an important role to play in our lives, and hopeful people know how to harness it to reach their goals.) But focusing solely on willpower ignores the psychological force that we activate when we get excited about the future. Our exhausting efforts at self-control run a distant second to knowing how to tap the generous, uplifting, and motivating energy of hope.

Resisting the Devil’s Breakfast

Imagine that you have been successfully losing several pounds a month and are nearing your goal weight after a year of exercise and healthy eating. On a morning when you’re feeling especially lean, you join a friend at her office for a brief meeting. As you walk in, you see them:

fresh doughnuts, one dozen shiny sugarcoated rings of glistening yumminess, six chocolate and six glazed. A sign next to the box says “Treat yourself! You’re worth it.”

What will determine if you indulge? Surely this is a situation where willpower counts. And in fact, if you had a good night’s sleep and a full, healthy breakfast, willpower might stand a chance. But it turns out that your ability to resist temptation depends even more on your future thinking style. Let me explain.

The teachers at my Catholic high school considered willpower a moral strength that we could build by exercising it every day. Thanks to the work of Roy Baumeister of Florida State University, we now can look into the brain and see exactly where this strength is coming from. To some extent, my teachers were right. Baumeister showed experimentally that students who were required to do things like sit up straight, exercise regularly, and speak in complete sentences later showed greater self-control in their lives. They also persisted longer in lab tests like solving difficult puzzles, squeezing a handgrip, and keeping their minds off sex.

However, when Baumeister tracked the physiology of self-control, he discovered that will, like a muscle, becomes fatigued with overuse. Each time we resist an impulse (whether to do something or to stop doing something), we tap the brain’s energy, in the form of glucose, to tamp down that impulse. Students who had already completed one series of willpower exercises—like resisting cookies when they were hungry or ignoring a comedy video in order to track a boring computer display—subsequently gave up earlier on the puzzle and handgrip tests. In other words, willpower starts to break down whenever we’re mentally and physically depleted, whether from fatigue, overwork, hunger, or other kinds of stress.

Of course, the biggest aha that many people took from Baumeister’s work was that dieting itself—through hunger and glucose depletion—undermines our ability to keep dieting. But a study led by psychologist Gabriele Oettingen of New York University complicates this picture.

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Like so many people in America, a group of Philadelphia women were making another attempt to lose weight. They'd already signed up for a University of Pennsylvania study featuring a very-low-calorie diet and a year of weekly meetings designed to help them control their eating. Before the diet began, the researchers asked them how many pounds they wanted to lose. The women also answered questions about their expectations, such as "How confident are you that after the program is completed you will have lost that amount?"

But now the researchers tapped into a different kind of thinking—the stories we tell about ourselves. Each woman was asked to imagine herself as the main character in four open-ended scenarios related to food and weight loss—something like my free-doughnut challenge. Here's one of the prompts:

You have just completed Penn's weight-loss program. Tonight you have made plans to go out with an old friend whom you haven't seen in about a year. As you wait for your friend to arrive, you imagine . . .

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The women wrote down their thoughts and feelings, and the researchers coded these fantasy responses as positive (the women found it easy to resist food temptations, they achieved their ideal body weight) or negative (they continued to struggle with temptation).

Fast-forward one year. The women who had positive expectations for the program were much more likely to have attended the weekly sessions than the women with negative expectations. They also lost an average of twenty-six pounds *more* than the women who doubted their ability to meet their goal. In fact, the more positive a woman's expectation, the more weight she lost. The least successful of the dieters by far were the women who had low initial expectations and outrageously positive fantasies about how easy it would be to lose weight and how great they would look. Even the pessimists (women with low expectations) who acknowledged potential difficulties and struggle lost more.

The researchers concluded that the women who had foreseen challenges would actually rehearse what they would do when confronted with temptations like free doughnuts (and other pitfalls). The positive fantasies were daydreams that had no payoff in reality.

Why Wishing Can Be Bad for You

A group of newly minted professionals who were looking for their first job took part in another subtle experiment led by Oettingen. She and her team recruited students who were completing graduate school in a tough economic climate and asked them to rate their likelihood of obtaining a good job. The researchers also asked them to write down their positive and negative “thoughts, images, and fantasies” about the process of looking for and finding work and to indicate how often they had both positive and negative thoughts. Oettingen then got permission to contact the students two years later and ask them how their job searches had gone.

Stop for a minute and make your own guess about how things turned out. Is it better to “think positive,” to repeatedly visualize a clear and easy path to a new job? Or should you be more realistic, accounting for the difficulties and effort involved? Which vision will charge you up and keep you going until you reach your goal?

Two years later, Oettingen found most of her recruits and asked them how many applications they’d sent out, how many job offers they’d received, and how much money they were making. A third of the participants were still without a job in their field, a testament to the toughness of the job market. The students who had the most success combined high expectations for a good job with realistic thoughts about the process of getting one. The students who had the most positive thoughts and fantasies simply hadn’t tried as hard. They had sent out fewer applications, received fewer offers, and made less money when they did land a job.

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In other words, hope trumped wishful thinking. When we hope, we have high expectations for the future *and* a clear-eyed view of the obstacles that we need to overcome in order to get there. We are primed for action. But wishful thinking can undermine our efforts, making us passive and less likely to reach coveted goals.

Wishing ourselves into failure and loss is bad enough. But when we push our wishful thinking onto others and call it hope it is potentially destructive.

This is what writer and activist Barbara Ehrenreich realized when she entered what she called “Cancerland” after a routine mammogram. Several years later, she fired a broadside at all the easy forms of positive thinking she encountered during her treatment, which included grueling chemotherapy. Her article, called “The Pathologies of Hope,” started this way:

I hate hope. It was hammered into me constantly a few years ago when I was being treated for breast cancer: Think positively! Don't lose hope! Wear your pink ribbon with pride! A couple of years later, I was alarmed to discover that the facility where I received my follow-up care was called the Hope Center. Hope? What about a cure? . . . Fuck hope. Keep us alive.

It pained me to read this, but who could blame her? During one of the most difficult times of her life, well-intentioned but misguided people were telling her to think about the future in a way that could actually undermine her well-being. (If you don't get better, is it your fault for not being “positive” enough?) These people were telling her to wish, not hope. And they didn't know the difference. Interestingly, the “wishiness” of her caregivers made Ehrenreich agitated and proactive, which are characteristics of a high-hope person under pressure.

Are You Hopeful . . . or Just Optimistic?

In fact, you can be both hopeful and optimistic, but, as a hope researcher, I'm a stickler about when and how I use these terms.

You're optimistic if you think the future will be better than the present. As the old song goes, you "stay on the sunny side," see the glass half full, look at life through rose-colored glasses, and generally think things will turn out well.

You're hopeful if you think that the future will be better and that you have a role in making it so. You might consider yourself a hard-nosed realist, even a pessimist—someone who sees the world in a clear, cold light—but you take action to improve any situation that's important to you.

Optimism is an attitude. It doesn't concern itself with real information about the future, and it may not have a specific goal. Some researchers call optimism an "illusion," or a "positive expectation bias."

Optimism is partly based on temperament—some babies come into the world inclined to embrace experience, while others shy away. The components of hopeful thinking are learned in early childhood; if all goes well, they're in place by age two.

Optimism can benefit us. It can foster good health and happiness, buffer stress and anxiety, and help us cope better with the present.

But when life throws us a curve, when the going gets tough, optimists can get stuck and frustrated. Hopeful people shine in negative situations. They are energized to act and they find meaning and dignity in moving ahead, whatever the challenge.

The Energy of Hope

It now looks as though wishing is impotent because it does not give us—and may actually sap—the energy we need to pursue our goals. This is the downside of passive positive thinking.

Pause a minute and think about your upcoming week. What's on your plate? What are your big responsibilities? Now imagine that everything goes amazingly well. You meet every challenge with ease. You enjoy the feeling of being in control and on top of things. You don't feel pressed for time, and yet you manage to get everything done. Wonderful, isn't it? An exercise in fantasy, right?

Heather Barry Kappes (a member of Oettingen's research team at NYU) gave this fantasy exercise to one group of research subjects—prompting them to think about a hassle-free perfect week. She asked another group to write down whatever they thought might happen in the coming week with no fantasizing. Then her team focused on the feelings of energy generated in each group, fantasy week and normal week. How excited, enthusiastic, and active did participants feel afterward? The “ideal week” group actually reported lower levels of energy. (Kappes has also researched this effect using physiological measures like systolic blood pressure, which rises whenever we're aroused to take action.)

Perhaps more surprising, when participants reported in a week later, the initial energy drain turned out to be lasting. The “ideal week” group reported that they accomplished less than the group that had written down more neutral (and realistic) thoughts. So a Sunday night filled with wishes for the upcoming week will actually *rob* you of the energy you need to get things done Monday through Friday.

Reflecting on these findings, Barry Kappes said, “When you fantasize something very positive, it's almost like you are actually living it.” The mind reacts as if the goal has already been achieved. This is why fantasy “will sap job seekers of the energy to pound the pavement, and

drain the lvelorn of the energy to approach the one they like.” We’re actually better off when we imagine ourselves surmounting obstacles, problems, and setbacks.

Beware of Mental Fast Food

Wishes are mental fast food. They are mind candy (or doughnuts) that satisfy for the moment but do nothing to nourish us for the long haul. That’s why people who say “think positive” trigger my negative thinking. “Really, that’s the best you can do?” Yes, I know they are trying to be supportive, but this is just lazy cheerleading. There is not a stitch of evidence that wish-fulfillment thinking (“Every day in every way I am getting better and better”) improves anyone’s lives in any meaningful way.

The same goes for bestselling “self-improvement” books (like *The Secret* and *The Power*) that tell us the only thing we have to change is our minds, and reality will align with our wishes. Sorry, the so-called law of attraction is not a law, and telling yourself “I will have enough money for everything I desire” will not fill your wallet, no matter how many times you repeat it.

Yet future thinking that is rich with imagery is a core ingredient of both hoping and wishing. If you are thinking about a desirable outcome, you may be hopeful. Then again, you may be just wishing. Both future visions can give you the warm fuzzies. Both are self-reinforcing—priming the pleasure pump with thoughts about a wonderful vacation will lead you to think more about that destination. Both can also help you relax and buffer you against stress, anxiety, and other negative emotions. But these benefits are fleeting *unless your thoughts spark action*. Only hope starts you thinking about ways to save money to pay for that trip to the ocean and your lodging when you get there.

In the three chapters that follow, I’m going to look more closely at how hope works in the real world. You’ll see where genuine hope parts company with wishing, and how hope can stay strong even when you

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acknowledge your limited ability to predict or influence the future. The real world is where we face the circumstances of birth or chance or personality that could hold us back, and where we have to choose between hope and stagnation. We'll see how the three elements of hope (Goals, Agency, and Pathways, introduced in chapter 2) work together in the stories of some extraordinary individuals. I'll also alert you to the destructive messages in our culture that undermine hope, so you recognize and combat them when they come your way.





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