

Defensive Pessimism: A Cover For Self-Protection

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ABSTRACT: *This paper addresses on how the persons termed as ‘Defensive Pessimists’ approach towards achieving their goal. They set low expectations of their performance especially when faced with risky situations in order to prepare themselves well and so avoid potential failure. Besides, they also use anxiety to motivate themselves to perform better in their tasks. Further, setting low target goals and employing anxiety as a motivating factor is a type of “cover” devised with the aim to protect themselves from losing their respect, honour and position in the society.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In day to day life, few people dare to admit and acknowledge their mistakes when they encounter failures. Rather, most of the people love playing the “Blame” game. They would try ways and means to excuse themselves and without any hesitation they would say: “It’s not my fault.” But when they encountered success, they would take pride in telling the world: “It’s all my sole efforts.” So, different persons construct different strategies to declare their innocence in protecting their own ego.

Defensive Pessimists strategically devise some types of covers to protect themselves thus satisfying their proud personal ego. That their ego should never be hurt, they would set low performance level for themselves: “I can’t do more than this.” This strategy of setting low expectations of their performance, especially when faced with a risky situation, is done with the intention of avoiding potential failure and thus prevent a loss of their self-esteem (Norem & Cantor, 1986; Guth, 2018). These people can never think of annihilating their ego. Thus, they set low mastery goals for themselves.

Nancy Cantor coined the term “Defensive pessimism”. This term refers to the strategy of the mind in which people termed as Defensive Pessimists set unrealistically low expectations for themselves and their performance ability. This setting of low expectations is done specifically before engaging in any risky situation with the intention of preparing themselves for the “potential failure” and thus intrinsically get themselves motivated for hard-work, so that failure can be escaped. In every defensive pessimist, burns a strong desire for success and fear of failure. They cannot dream of tarnishing and eroding away their own self-esteem by failure. They are thus always haunted by anxiety and nervousness before entering any risky situation, say academic exams. But what is interesting to know about them is this: anxiety is being used by them as the motivating factor pushing them to work hard (Guth, 2018) and thus achieve higher than the level they have set for themselves. In this way, they are protecting their own self-esteem from social defamation.

Defensive Pessimism is a “cognitive strategy”: a strategy which narrates how people dispose themselves in order to get their goals or their tasks in life fulfilled (Norem, 1989). It gives a description of what the individual is expecting, appraising, planning as he pursues his intended goal (Norem, 1989). It is due to the existence of the goals formulated that the strategies are simultaneously developed. Thus the same individual may use different

strategies as he strives towards achieving his goal. This implies that an individual in one situation may resort to the use of defensive pessimism, in another situation he may use strategic optimism, and some other strategy in a third.

Goals direct one's attention and action and lead to higher performance (Guth, 2018). That is the reason why goals are set. Time and again, children are being asked by their teachers to discover their aim in life (goal). This is done to make them understand that having an aim in life is a must for achieving improvement at every stage of their life. Setting a goal is also a prerequisite for success and higher performance till the goal is reached. Thus, the higher the goal set, the higher will be the performance (Guth, 2018). Of course, we cannot deny the fact that the Defensive Pessimists do also set goals for themselves. But what differentiates them from others is this: They set very low goals, low expectations, and low performance levels for themselves (Guth, 2018). For the Defensive Pessimists, setting low expectations is done with the motive of avoiding failure rather than aiming for success (Guth, 2018). They cannot think of plunging themselves into the ocean of failure. They cannot think of losing or distorting their image by failure. They are rather anxious and nervous all the time because they fear failure (Norem & Cantor, 1986). Ironically, they use failure to motivate themselves to attain goals that are much higher than those they have set for themselves (Parra, 2009).

In life, people encounter all types of situations. This points out to the fact that there are times that they will encounter success. At times, that they will also have to confront with failure and disappointment (Guth, 2018; Norem & Cantor, 1986). As the saying goes: "Failures are the stepping stones to success." This famous saying is a message of hope and encouragement to a person who encountered failure. Through this saying a person comes to realize that failure is not the end of everything and he is taught to accept failures because they are the necessary conditions conducive to success. A person who is thus reinforced and encouraged received some rays of hope and thus is able to face failure successfully. Such a person will come to realize that failure is a must if he is to succeed. He will come to accept that failures must never be avoided if he desires success. Rather, he will prepare himself well in confrontation with failures and thus achieves success. Such a person will not feel his dreams and hopes shattered when he confronts failures. He will come to understand that the Road to Success is not an easy one, but he must put a lot of efforts and struggles in order to achieve it. He must arm himself well in order to defeat failure. He will not worry even if in the process, failure brings distortion to his big dreams and his personal image in the society. In contrast, the encounter with failure motivates him for putting more efforts in order to achieve his dreams. Such a person has no worry and is not nervous even when he thinks and foresees the hurdles lying on the path to success. Rather, he will love meeting those hardships and hurdles and he is sure to overcome them. Such a person is called an Optimist. This type of person, feels that the more failures he encounters, the more perfect he becomes.

On the contrary, the Defensive Pessimists find out ways and means to avoid failure. They will use their utmost efforts to avoid meeting with failure. They cannot think of confronting with failure. They foresee themselves falling flat before the mighty Failure. They will be anxious when they think of meeting with failure. They do not believe that failure perfects their skills and behavior. They cannot think of the word FAILURE. This word is abominable to them. They see themselves as footprints on the sand washed away by the ocean waves. They are thus determined that failure should never touch them and thus get their image distorted. It is on account of this, that they prefer setting low goals for themselves. Therefore they try to avoid failure and also avoid being interfered by others.

Defensive pessimists harness anxiety to motivate them to achieve higher (Parra, 2009). These people might have not failed in their life. Rather, their past was full of success and high achievements (Eliot, 2003). They might have even performed better than the

optimists. But whenever they are entering any risky situation, say an upcoming exam, they would be always be nervous and anxious and repeatedly insist that they are going to fail. They hold firmly to the conviction that they are sure to perform poorly in that upcoming event. Any sort of encouragement and reinforcement from their friends will only lead them to experience more anxiety and confusion. None of what their friends say or do, can give them the conviction that things will not happen the way they expect.

For the defensive pessimists, receiving reinforcement is a disturbing factor (Guth, 2018). When they are told to abandon their negative expectation and start thinking optimistically, their performance suffers (Norem & Cantor, 1986; Guth, 2018). It is on account of this that the defensive pessimists as they approach towards their goals, guard themselves from being interfered by others (Parra, 2009). They focus themselves on the steps needed for the attainment of the goals set and for avoiding failure. Harnessing anxiety and setting low expectation facilitate their performance rather than causing harm to them (Guth, 2018; Parra, 2009).

For the defensive pessimists, setting low self-expectations is not based on prior experience. Rather, it is adopted for motivational and protective purposes. These types of people are very keen on protecting their 'selves'. The defensive pessimism is a strategy for self-protection. The defensive pessimists use this strategy to cover and protect themselves from failure and poor performance. The real pessimists always perform poorly but not the defensive pessimists. Adopting the defensive pessimism strategy, does not appear to hamper their performance, though they expect to fail or perform badly in the upcoming risky situation. The reason is because these people never fail in their life, rather they even outperform the optimists. For the defensive pessimists, setting low expectations for their performance does not imply that these people are dissatisfied with success. Rather, it is a tactic to protect themselves and thus avoid "potential failure".

Defensive pessimism aims at protecting the 'self'. This strategy is adopted to effectively manage any risky situation and to cushion themselves against confrontation with any failure. The use of the defensive pessimism is to help them cope up with the expected negative outcomes. Thoughts of the expected unpleasant outcomes result in increase in the anxiety level. This provides them an opportunity to use anxiety as a 'motivating factor' which push them to work very hard and avoid those expected negative outcomes.

Having anxiety is a must for the Defensive Pessimists because it motivates them to perform better in their tasks (Guth, 2018; Parra, 2009). In other words, anxiety boosts their performance. If the 'anxiety' element is absent, it is quite sure that they will not be able to do well in the upcoming task. Rather their performance will for sure suffer. Thus, before undertaking any task, they will brood over their performance and foresee themselves encountering with failure. In this way, a feeling of anxiety is developed. They will repeatedly say to themselves: "I am afraid.....I will fail in this task". Thus, they will use this feeling of anxiety as a motivating factor and will resultantly make plans and strategies to avoid confronting with failures (Guth, 2018; Parra, 2009). This is concretely done by setting low targets for themselves, targets that are easily achievable.

"What will people say if I fail...what will my parents say.... What will my teachers think of me...what will my friends suspect...?" These are only few of the end-number of questions that the Defensive Pessimists keep thinking and brooding about before facing any risky situation. They cannot accept the fact that all those people whether parents, friends, teachers and others with whom they are very familiar should get a wrong conception about them due to their poor performance. They could not digest the fact imagining that everyone they know would draw a false conclusion about their personality on account of their poor performance or failure. So they would use their utmost efforts using all the possible means to "cushion" themselves to avoid the potential failure (Zuzul, 2008), and consequently

portraying before the society that they are good as they have always been. These types of people are always keen on showing their good image before the world.

Every human always craves to externally manifest the bright side of himself to the world. No one would pleurably say to his friends: "No one is as bad as I am." Even if he may say so, it is only indirectly implying that he desires them to accept him that he is good. Although a person might be infamously known for his crimes throughout his life, but when it comes to portraying himself before the society he would always try to hide the dark side of his life. The reason behind this is that he fears that he might not be accepted by the society and by his peers if his crimes were revealed and publicly made known. This self-defensive strategy is innate in everyone: It is a strategy to protect oneself and made oneself apparently appear good before the society. The defensive pessimists' strategy for self-protection is setting low target goals for themselves and harnessing the anxiety as a motivating factor towards better performance.

Everyone, in one way or the other, experiences anxiety in his life. This particularly happens when he is dealing with a situation that involves a lot of risk and sacrifice. Anxiety is generally believed to disrupt the performance (Wong, 2013), unless it is well managed and skillfully coped with. According to Eysenck and Calvo (1992), anxiety often weakens performance especially under test conditions. A highly-anxious person has the tendency to perform poorly than the one with low test anxiety. For Wine (1971), the difference between a person who has high level of anxiety and one whose level of anxiety is low is marked by the loss of focus in the task at hand. But the defensive pessimists utilize anxiety as a means to motivate themselves in preparation for examinations (Norem & Cantor, 1986).

According to the Theory of Self-Regulated Learning, learners are 'potentially capable' of having an awareness of the nature of the task, learning experiences, setbacks, and end goals (Pintrich, 2004). This awareness helps them in controlling the various aspects of learning for achieving the desired outcomes (Pintrich, 2004). The use of these specific strategies is crucial in becoming a self-regulated learner. The strategy of Defensive pessimism can be acknowledged as a self-regulated learning strategy as it involves "setting unrealistically low expectations in a risky situation in an attempt to harness anxiety so that performance is unimpaired" (Norem & Cantor, 1986). The defensive mechanism of the defensive pessimists bases itself on the fact that there exists an "inconsistency" between their successful performance in the previous tasks and the low expectation they have for success in the upcoming tasks (Thompson & le Fevre, 1999).

For protecting themselves from potential disappointment for their performance, the defensive pessimists set low expectations for their performance. Suárez Riveiro said that the Defensive Pessimists activate their "Negative Self- Schema" to cope up with the anxiety (2014). Whereas Scheier said that some people used "Problem-focused" strategy, while others use "Emotion focused" strategy to cope up with the situation that they are going to encounter. Rene and Guia (2018) talk about 'test anxiety' where they said that test anxiety arises on account of the fact that a person is unprepared for it and thus feels he lacks the necessary skills to cope with the situation. Thus, according to them, Defensive Pessimism is a strategy which "buffers" the impact of anxiety in any 'licensure examination'. For Folkman and Lazarus (1985), the essence of coping with stress and anxiety is 'Change'. The ways a person copes with anxiety is always changing. At one moment he becomes angry, at another moment guilty, while at some other times, he becomes loving and joyful. For Rosenbaum (1980), the strategy of a person for coping with stress and anxiety underlies his ability to "withstand pain in a cold pressor task". Scheier and Carver (1985) are of the opinion that having an "optimistic orientation" is a very effective way to cope with "stressful life events" in comparison to Pessimism. Taylor and Brown (1988) concur their viewpoints with Scheier

and Carver. Whereas Norem and Cantor (1986) said that having a defensive pessimistic orientation is but another effective way of coping with anxiety.

Goal setting is characteristic of everyone. This means that a person's character can be known by the goals he sets for himself. But the fact remains that everyone has his own goal in life, even if the goal set might be contradicting to what is generally expected by the society. Everyone wants to achieve something in life. Markus and Wurf (1986) are of the opinion that the choice of a goal is determined by what a person expects of his personal abilities; his control over his behaviour and the outcomes that may result by performing a certain behaviour. Bandura and Schunk (1981) are of the opinion that setting "proximal goals" will produce the "best performance" and will further increase the "intrinsic motivation". Whereas researchers like Kuhl (1984) doubted if the focus on goal can promote "self-regulation". Mischel (1981) is of the opinion that the more attention a person gives to the "end goal", the more will he be distracted from acting on achievement of the same. According to Scheier (1986), if a person expects "successful outcomes", then his efforts to achieve the goals he sets, will be renewed. Contrary to Scheier's viewpoints, the Defensive Pessimists always expect the worst of their performance. As a result, they set low target goals for themselves, goals that are easily achievable. Their effort to work hard and perform better is boosted and renewed by the anxiety they have before performing an upcoming task.

Thus we see that anxiety plays a very important role in the life of the defensive pessimists. Without anxiety, it might be impossible for the defensive pessimists to perform better in their tasks. It on account of this anxiety that at times they are able to outperform the optimists. For the optimists, anxiety might be a disturbing and unpleasant factor which may thwart their progress towards the achievement of the goal. Thus they would try different ways and means how to cope with the anxiety and stress. But for the defensive pessimists, anxiety is a necessity. It is motivating factor for better performance and so they use it to their advantage. If the defensive pessimists are able to protect their self-worth and preserve their image from getting distorted, it is all because of the anxiety. This element of anxiety motivates them for hard work and helps them to avoid failure.

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