

Always looking on the bright side of life

By Ruth Ostrow, *The Australian*, 3 June 2019

The other night I went for dinner with a friend who is perhaps the happiest, most positive person I've met. He can be a bit annoying in his constant thrall and enthusiasm — even first thing in the morning before coffee — but his happiness is also inspiring and contagious.

I feel a lot more motivated and upbeat when I'm with him, and the feeling lingers after we part.

He's a bit like having a sugar hit. If it's sunny, he is overjoyed; if it's raining, he is overjoyed too — farmers are getting much needed water and his garden is getting so much nourishment.

His optimism is infectious but in my humble opinion, speaking as a killjoy, it does sometimes border on insane.

Which is apparently the case. There is a psychological condition being discussed nowadays called *pronoia*, which is the positive counterpart of *paranoia*. It is the belief that the universe is conspiring not against you but, rather, to make you happy and you are powerless to stop the abundance. Huh?

According to Marc Cohen, founding professor of complementary medicine at RMIT University, this state has been described in psychiatric literature as a pathological condition.

Symptoms of *pronoia* include “delusions of support and exaggerated attractiveness as well as the delusion that others think well of one and ... the products of one's efforts”.

Pronoics, similar to their negative counterparts, *paranoics*, see conspiracy but they believe everything and everyone is plotting for their highest good and the divine creator is bestowing blessings.

The origins of the concept have been loosely attributed to a 1982 article, titled “*Pronoia*”, by Fred H. Goldner from City University of New York's Queens College, published in the journal *Social Problems*. He describes *pronoia* as a delusionary condition.

“Actions and the products of one's efforts are thought to be well received and praised by others. Mere acquaintances are thought to be close friends; politeness and the exchange of pleasantries are taken as expressions of deep attachment and the promise of future support,” Goldner writes.

Cohen says that rather than viewing *pronoia* as a pathological state, it is possible to view the condition of unbridled happiness as highly desirable and to cultivate it for good health. “By adopting the attitude that whatever happens is for your benefit, you open yourself up to the possibility of positive outcomes, and thus stop being afraid of change.

“You simply assume that any change occurring will eventually be a great lesson or source of joy, and that even if circumstances appear negative, there's a hidden treasure waiting to be uncovered.”

Cohen says: “Many people in today’s society endure the present, waiting for the promise of future happiness, thinking: ‘I’ll be happy when I’m rich’, or ‘I’ll be happy when I get a good job’, or ‘I’ll be happy when I get a nose job’, or ‘when I get married/divorced’.”

He says this line of thought is not supported by available evidence, as research on Lotto winners has shown. “If you are happy now, you are likely to be happy when you win. Similarly, if you are unhappy now, the money won’t make a difference to your core state. So instead of changing your circumstances, you need to change your attitude to your circumstances.”

Martin Seligman, the father of positive psychology and author of *Learned Optimism*, talks about optimism as a predictor of success and good health. Those who can think in a positive way and reframe things go the furthest in life. In the positive psychology movement, there is never such a thing as being too positive and people are taught to reframe events that happen to them as worthwhile lessons or learning experiences or a chance to do better.

That is all very well but the fact is that excessive happiness is often a negative condition. One of the symptoms of bipolar mood disorder is the increased sense of euphoria. Hallucinations of being chosen for a special mission is one of the common identifiers of a schizophrenic episode.

One of the symptoms of being a full-blown narcissist is believing higher forces are conspiring to make the world fantastic for you. I’ve had many encounters with “spiritual narcissists”, cult leaders or people who follow religion so totally that they believe they are marked for greatness by God and, as an earthly representative, deserve to be treated differently. They’re otherwise known as entitlement schemers or those with a messianic complex.

In the film *Fierce Creatures*, Jamie Lee Curtis’s character describes Kevin Kline’s character as pronoid: “It means that despite all the available evidence, you actually think that people like you. Your perception of life is that it is one long benefit dinner in your honour, with everyone cheering you on and wanting you to win everything. You think you’re the prince, Vince.”

So how to tell the difference between just being a happy chappy or being a person untethered from reality? Spiritual teacher, Western Buddhist monk and scientist Alan Wallace describes two states of happiness: hedonia and eudemonia. Translation: people with hedonistic tendencies love the feeling of joy, euphoria, pleasure and sex, and often will indulge or do anything to get their hit. People with eudemonia are equally “happy”, but it is not short-lived and fleeting like superficial hedonism. Rather, it is a deep sense of contentment and meaning, the sort of happiness that comes from drinking warm hot chocolate rather than scotch or wine. It’s not a buzzy feeling but, rather, a meaningful grounded sense of self, which doesn’t change very much as circumstances do.

Scientific studies don’t seem to discriminate. They prove that, in general, happy people have more resistance to heart disease, diabetes, hypertension and a host of immune disorders. Pronoia could well be the healthiest mental disorder around.

ruth.ostrow@hotmail.com

www.ruthostrow.com