



## Stanford eCorner

### The Advantage of Anxiety

Adam Grant, *University of Pennsylvania*

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Adam Grant, a management professor at the University of Pennsylvania, talks about how the energy of nervous anticipation allows “defensive pessimists” to perform just as well as those who calmly prepare for a looming challenge and visualize success in advance. He adds that efforts to reduce stress in such instances can even be counterproductive. “The great thing about both anxiety and excitement is they both involve uncertainty,” Grant observes.



#### Transcript

- You know what I thought when I started studying originals? That they were just cut from a different cloth than the rest of us. That they didn't feel the same doubt and fear and anxiety that we do, and I had a chance to interview a whole bunch of them, and I was surprised that when I talked to Mark Cuban, and Elon Musk, and Larry Page, and a whole bunch of their peers, they all said the same thing, which is that they were terrified when they had their big ideas, but they chose to take action anyway, and I was trying to figure out what propelled them to act, even in the face of anxiety and fear, and what I learned, actually, traced back to the time when I was in school. So, for those of you who are students, I want you to think back to the last time you had a big exam to prepare for, and the question is, about a week before your big test, what were you doing? So if you're an optimist, optimists start about a week beforehand imagining the perfect performance. Right? They're visualizing knowing the answers to every question on the test and acing it, and then also being the person who about, like, 19 minutes into the exam is able to stand up and shout, I won, and then leave, just to make all their peers really nervous. (Audience laughter) And that's, that kind of goes pretty well, right? Optimists are excited by a positive vision of the future that motivates them, and they study really hard and they often ace the test. For those of you who are defensive pessimists, you have a slightly different emotional experience going into that exam. So, about a week beforehand, you wake up at 3AM in a cold sweat, panicked, that not only are you going to fail the exam, you're gonna do so badly that your professor will take away points on all your previous exams, because there's no way you could have earned them, and that fear actually starts to create motivation, right? You don't want to fail, and so you study really hard, and ironically, you do just as well as the strategic optimist, right? That anxiety actually becomes a source of motivation, and across the board, defensive pessimism... excuse me, defensive pessimism turns out to be an effective strategy, in that if you can psych yourself up into the state where you are convinced that you are going to fail, that will motivate you to work a lot harder on, not just preparing for a test, but pitching an idea and trying to find people who will support it, and what's funny is, then you'll succeed, and afterward, when you have a new idea, or a new exam, you convince yourself no, this one is different. This time I really am gonna fail, and you start freaking out over and over again and that cycle continues, because that anxiety is necessary to motivate you, and the funny thing about this is there's one way to sabotage the performance of defensive pessimists, which is you make them happy. That's not a joke, that's a data point actually.

If you put defensive pessimists in a good mood, their performance drops, because they no longer have the anxiety they need to propel themselves into that frenzy of effort. So, I think this is, this is a really critical skill, and I think that sometimes that anxiety also leads to really creative solutions to problems. (Audience laughter) Now, that for me begs the questions of, what do you do when that anxiety becomes debilitating, when it literally causes you to freeze, or it disrupts your thinking capabilities, and the best thing that I've learned about this actually comes out of evolutionary psychology. So, I think you're all familiar of prehistoric theories of how our minds tended to work, which is a oversimplified story that goes like this. So, imagine that you're walking in a jungle, and you see something moving in the bushes in the distance, and you watch this happen and you're like,

you know, this, this thing that's moving seems to have orange and black stripes. There's sharp objects protruding from it's mouth. I wonder what that is, and you die. Or, you do what most people did, which is immediately, you see that thing moving in the bushes and you're like tiger, run, and then you get to survive and pass on your genes, and I think many experts believe that we evolved in amygdala to serve this function which is basically often the fear of circuitry involved in driving that gut reaction which bypasses your higher level thinking capabilities, and just causes you to immediately show fight or flight. The problem is, we can have those kinds of emotional reactions to events today that are totally ordinary, right, that are not survival relevant, and the key is to be able to keep those emotions in check. Another former student, Alison Wood Brooks, who is now at Harvard Business School, ended up doing some studies to try and figure out how to manage that anxiety effectively, and when she asked people, how do you manage anxiety, she found the most common answer by far was I try to calm down, I listen to relaxing music, I remind myself that everything's going to be okay, and over 90% of people said that is the best way to deal with it, and it turns out it's not, because when you're super anxious it's really hard to slam on the brakes when you have a brick on a gas pedal.

What Alison found is that if instead of trying to calm down, you say I'm excited, you actually manage your anxiety much more effectively, because excitement, just like anxiety, is a high-intensity emotion, and so you can keep your foot on the gas pedal and just convert into something that's a little bit more energizing, and the great thing about both anxiety and excitement is they both involve uncertainty. When you have something coming up in the future and you don't know what's going to happen, you can be nervous about it going poorly, or you can be excited about it going well.