



Tali Sharot speaking about
"The Optimism Bias"
Credits: Mickey Ronningen

The human brain: optimism bias

By [Micheline Ronningen](#), Portland Longevity Examiner

According to neuroscientist Tali Sharot, and others in the know, the human brain tends to “think” optimistically. We learn that firsthand thanks to Powell’s City of Books on Burnside, Portland, Oregon and the [OHSU Brain Institute](#) in sponsoring Sharot’s talk on Monday June 27, 2011 in Powell’s third floor Pearl Room. Another neuroscientist, David Eagleman, shared the evening, but we’ll get to his brain news later. The evening attracted about 300 listeners, ranging in age from 20’s to 70’s, sitting, standing, squatting. No one appeared disappointed.

Sharot’s recently released book, “[The Optimism Bias](#) / A Tour of the Irrationally Positive Brain” (Pantheon Books, New York, 2011) is generating discussion, speculation and rave [review](#).

What’s neuroscience?

It’s the scientific study, especially flaming into existence since the 1960’s, of the nervous system. For vertebrates like us this means neuroscientists are investigating the brain, spinal cord, nerves, [ganglia](#), eyes, ears, tongue, skin, nose and muscles and glands and mapping how it all responds to internal and external stimuli. Obviously this is a huge undertaking. It’s currently broken down into about [fifteen](#) interest specialties or disciplines, many of which overlap.

Yet as we know, people have wondered about thinking and emotion for countless generations. According to [Wiki](#) “The study of the nervous system dates back to ancient Egypt.” That puts the origins of neuroscience back to about 1700 BC.

“The task of neuroscience is to explain behavior ... to understand the biological basis of consciousness and the mental processes by which we perceive, act, learn, and remember.” – Eric Kandel, “Principles of Neural Science,” 4th edition; McGraw-Hill Medical; January 5, 2000.

Define optimism

Most dictionaries agree that optimism suggests a penchant for looking on the bright side of things. Simple reason suggests that there probably is a bright side to a dark side. Witness sun and shadow. Light and dark. One usually accompanies the other at some point.

Optimism also embraces hope that all's well and will be so in the future.

“If an optimist had his left arm chewed off by an alligator, he might say in a pleasant and hopeful voice, ‘Well, this isn’t too bad, I don’t have a left arm anymore but at least nobody will ever ask me if I’m left-handed or right-handed’ but most of us would say something more along the lines of ‘Aaaaa! My arm! My arm!’” –Daniel Handler (as Lemony Snicket), [“Horseradish: Bitter Truths You Can’t Avoid”](#)

So what’s this optimism bias about?

Tali [Sharot’s](#) engaging, yet one-night only presentation at Powell’s naturally could only touch on a few key points from her research:

- Sharot explained that 80 percent of the population has an optimism bias. (The other 20% is presumed to be more realistic or un-optimistic; both groups may tend toward depression.)
- One aspect of this optimism bias pops out in that 10 percent of all adults believe they’ll live to be 100 years old. (That’s most likely not gonna happen. [Facts](#) suggest for a typical U.S. citizen the chances of living to 100 or better are one out of 5000.)
- We noticeably underestimate our chances of getting cancer or developing Alzheimer’s disease.
- The amygdala and rACC are the brain regions involved in imagining positive futures.
- Optimists live longer and healthier lives. (Make note dear Longevity Readers.)
- The present is significant but anticipation of the future has a profound impact on now.
- One of the pitfalls of over-optimism is underestimating risks.

“Why is Being a Cancer Survivor Better Than Winning the Tour de France?” —“The Optimism Bias,” find out in Chapter 10.

A few surprising points from Sharot’s book (wildly taken out of context; see full text):

- p. 20-1. “Studies show that thinking too much can lead to suboptimal judgments ... What’s going on? Why does thinking more lead to poorer choices?”
- p. 27. “Mental time travel—going back and forth through time and space in one’s mind—may be the most extraordinary of human talents.”
- p. 74. [Ben Page](#) ... summarized his findings by quoting a traditional saying: ‘If you want to be happy for a few hours, get drunk. If you want to be happy for a few years, get a wife. If you want to be happy forever, get a garden.’”
- p. 75. “Studies consistently show that if there is any correlation between having offspring and happiness, it is a negative one.”
- p. 85-8. Find out the principal factors leading us to wrongly predict what will make us happy.
- p. 110-14 and 117 (+). Discover the latest scientific thought re: depression, dread and expectation.

“The optimism bias is, by definition, our tendency to overestimate the probability of positive events and underestimate the probability of negative ones.” –Tali Sharot, in “The Optimism Bias,” p. 118-19.

- p. 167. “It is critical to understand precisely which details of emotional events are remembered better than those of mundane events, and which are remembered less well.”
- p. 189. “In a series of studies, [Neil Weinstein](#) (who coined the term optimism bias) showed that people believe they are less likely than average to suffer misfortunes (such as being fired from a job, being diagnosed with lung cancer, developing a drinking problem).”
- p. 194+. Find out how “differential learning” affects your expectations.
- p. 204. “This brings us to the second claim of this book—the assertion that our brains have evolved to overpredict future happiness and success, because, funnily enough, doing so makes health and progress more likely.”
- p. 209. The benefits and hazards of optimism.

Read it and cheer. It’s important to your longevity. Even [Mosing](#) et al (November 2009) are heard to say “Optimism has been shown to be important in maintaining wellbeing into old age....”

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