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Cheer up, you're really an optimist

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We all understand the cliché about a glass half-full implying a sense of optimism and one half-empty suggesting pessimism.

But a new book argues — surprisingly — that more of us have sunnier dispositions than we imagine.

Tali Sharot, a psychologist and neuroscientist fellow at Britain's University College London, says 80 per cent of us are optimists, explaining in an interview that being an optimist “doesn't mean you are a happy person, a smiley person. It's true that optimists tend to be happier. But being optimistic is about our expectations of the future.”

In *The Optimism Bias: A Tour of the Irrationally Positive Brain*, Sharot says our brains are hard-wired to be optimistic, defining it as “the inclination to overestimate the likelihood of encountering positive events in the future and to underestimate the likelihood of experiencing negative events.”

Her proof? Functional MRI images of people's brains.

“Without optimism, the first space shuttle might never have been launched, peace in the Middle East would never have been attempted, rates of remarriage would likely be nonexistent, our ancestors might never have ventured far from their tribes and we might all be cave dwellers still huddled together and dreaming of light and heat,” she notes in her book. The 20 per cent, the pessimists, are those who are likely in a deep depression: they can't project a future with any hope.

Sharot says she came to the subject of optimism by accident. She was studying in New York when 9/11 happened and she decided to research how emotion affects memory. Three years later, she and fellow researchers interviewed and did brain scans on 22 New Yorkers who were in Manhattan the day of the horrifying terror attack.

This eventually led Sharot to look at how the brain functioned when people were asked to imagine ordinary future events. She found that when her subjects were asked about the future, they often came up with “magnificent scenarios.” For example, when asked about an upcoming haircut, one of the study's participants visualized donating her shorn locks to Locks of Love, the non-profit organization that provides wigs to children with hair loss.

“This positive view of the future was something expressed again and again,” Sharot says. “We didn't expect it.” Sharot and her colleagues thought by asking people to imagine boring events in the future, they would see them in a matter-of-fact way, not in an imaginative one.

But, during their musings, parts of the brain — the amygdala and the rostral anterior cingulate cortex (rACC) — showed more neural activity, indicating optimism.

Imagination and emotion, Sharot came to understand, affect our memories and our ability to look ahead.

“It is a human tendency to encode positive information about the future even though as we go through life we have failures, we have heartaches, but we never become pessimistic,” she says. “How can that be? It turns out we learn much more from positive experiences than we do from negative ones.” And those are the experiences that stay with us — moments from a vacation, for example.

Most people, Sharot says, are mildly optimistic, and she includes herself in this group.

Exuberant optimists may be so self-confident, they get themselves in trouble: Look at the politicians and sports figures who cheat on their wives, thinking they won't get caught.

That sort of exuberant optimism was expressed by Joseph Stalin when he was warned by the British and Russian spies that Hitler was



Tali Sharot, author of *The Optimism Bias: A Tour of the Irrationally Positive Brain*.

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planning to invade Russia. Stalin refused to believe it. He was confident his non-aggression pact with Germany would prevent an assault. He was wrong.

On the other hand, optimism can create benefits. Sharot describes how the head coach of the Los Angeles Lakers, Pat Riley, helped his team remain NBA champions. After the 1987 title win, a reporter asked Riley if the Lakers could triumph the following year. Riley said: "I guarantee it." And he repeated his guarantee for months. In 1988, the Lakers once again won the title.

This is a "classic example of a self-fulfilling prophecy," Sharot writes. "By promising a second championship, he piled extra pressure on himself and his players." And they trained harder to make Riley's prediction come true.

Sharot can't explain why the topic of optimism garners so much interest. But she thinks her discovery that there are more optimists than pessimists might be the reason.

"Reality is different from what most people think it is," she says. "People aren't aware of their own optimism. They see themselves as realists. You have to give them these tests and show them the data before you can convince them they are optimists."

So how do you see that glass of water?