

- Thought and thinking

THE POWER OF THOUGHT

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A psychologist explores the trend for manifestation and its potential for bringing you success .



When the Australian television producer Rhonda Byrne hit rock bottom in 2004, she found salvation after discovering what she calls ‘the secret’ – the title she gave to her multi-millionselling book and film released a couple of years later. Apparently known and guarded by highly successful people for generations, the secret is that your thoughts shape your life.

“Remember that your thoughts are the primary cause of everything,” Byrne wrote, citing the ‘Law of Attraction’ as the underlying mechanism, which is the notion that your thoughts communicate with the cosmos and, in return, it gives you what you want. Through a process of ‘manifestation’ or ‘manifesting’, if you devote time to imagining that you already have what you want and even feeling grateful, as if you already have it, then “you will attract everything that you require,” Bryne wrote. Byrne cites an early 20th-century book on getting rich as among her influences, while the roots of manifestation go back at least as far as the late 19th-century New Thought movement, which placed an emphasis on the power of the human mind to influence external events.

A POPULAR TREND

Today, Byrne is far from the only guru advocating manifestation. On TikTok you’ll find countless manifesting-related videos clocking up billions of views collectively, promising the viewer health, wealth and happiness simply based on visualisation and positive thinking.

A cursory trawl of YouTube returns dozens of videos purporting to show how to manifest cash, dream jobs and even dream dates – for instance, by repeating mantras or affirmations that you’re already wealthy or dressing as if you’re wealthy, as a way to send wealth vibes to the cosmos in the hope it’ll give you wealth in return.

There are celebrity manifestation endorsers too, from Oprah Winfrey to Jim Carrey to Hannah Waddingham (she tells the story of thanking the Universe and asking it to give her a dream role, and later being rewarded with her part in the hit TV series *Ted Lasso*).

Manifesting might be popular, but surely any scientist will scoff at the notion that the Universe is somehow listening to your thoughts and waiting to respond in kind. Yes, but at the same time, rational psychologists with no interest in manifestation will tell you there are genuine benefits to practices and mindsets that look and sound like commonly touted parts of the manifesting process. These include: Being optimistic Studies suggest optimistic people tend to live longer and enjoy better health. Believing in your own capabilities The psychological concept of 'self-efficacy' is associated with career success and other positive outcomes. Practising affirmations Reminding yourself of your values and goals can boost self-esteem and reduce stress. Being grateful for what you already have Positive psychology recognises gratitude exercises as being good for mental health. Perceiving things in a positive way For instance, seeing opportunities instead of threats. Setting clear goals for what you want

Indeed, cognitive behavioural therapy – a mainstay of contemporary psychotherapy – is partly grounded in the idea that the key to better mental health is appraising your circumstances and thinking about the future in a more positively slanted and constructive way.

“If [belief in manifestation] makes people more optimistic about the future, then that’s probably no bad thing,” says Richard Wiseman, Professor of the Public Understanding of Psychology at the University of Hertfordshire and a researcher on the psychology of luck.

Christian Busch, a business professor at The USC Marshall School of Business in California and author of *The Serendipity Mindset*, agrees: “There are some truths hidden in [manifestation],” he says. “For example, by setting goals and imagining how to get there, we make it more likely that other people know how they can help us and that we can connect the dots more effectively.”

THE DOWNSIDES

So, should we bury our scepticism and start following the wisdom of Byrne and her ilk? It probably isn't a good idea.

In a study published online last year, a team of psychologists led by Dr Lucas Dixon at the University of Queensland surveyed over a thousand people about their beliefs in manifestation and their outcomes in life. Although the team cautioned that they can't infer causality from their results, they found that people who believed more strongly in

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manifestation (for example, agreeing with statements like: If I think about achieving success, those thoughts alone make success more likely) were more inclined to consider themselves successful. But crucially, they were also more likely to have experienced bankruptcy, to be drawn to risky investments, and to think they could achieve unlikely career and financial success in a short space of time. These findings aren't too surprising. Although positive thinking is generally beneficial, it's not enough on its own. When it becomes untethered from reality, it's a form of 'magical thinking', according to Dixon. “Realistic hope and optimism... stem from confidence in being able to use your knowledge, efforts and abilities to make the best of whatever comes your way in life,” he says. “Whereas magical thinking involves believing you can influence events in the future without a known physical explanation.”

A related problem with manifestation is that it doesn't emphasise enough (or at all), that you need to act on your goals. You can't just sit back and wait for the cosmos to serve up what you want on a plate, no matter how strong your powers of visualisation are. What's more, wildly unrealistic goals can backfire because they're the road to disappointment and a sense of failure.

“Positive thoughts are no more likely to make good things happen than negative thoughts are to make bad things happen,” says Kevin Dutton, Professor of the Public Understanding of Psychology at the University of Adelaide. “Sufferers of Generalised Anxiety Disorder are constantly thinking the

worst. Does it ever happen? 99.99 per cent of the time, no, it doesn't. So, if that's the case, why should it be any different for thinking positive thoughts?"

In fact, there are reasons to worry that believing in manifesting could be harmful in many contexts. Dixon sees it as part of a larger problem with extreme and unrealistic positivity, especially as presented in misleading ways on social media by manipulative influencers. "For example," he says, "The Secret claims that all events in life are caused by your thoughts and desires. This is potentially damaging. What if someone neglects their debts for fear of manifesting more debt through negative thoughts? What if a parent believes the cure to their child's cancer is to prescribe them positive affirmations rather than medical treatment? It's important to challenge such extremes."

SEEING THE LINKS

If the so-called 'Law of Attraction' is bunkum and practising manifesting is more likely to lead to financial ruin than a future of untold wealth and prosperity, what should we do instead? What would it look like if we took the alluring positivity of manifestation and applied it in a way that had more scientific grounding?

The first thing to bear in mind is that fostering a generally positive, hopeful and optimistic mindset is likely to be beneficial if it's grounded in reality. Feeling more positive about the future is less stressful than fearing the worst, and if you're optimistic, you're more likely to notice and seek out opportunities in life. Busch thinks of this in

terms of serendipity or what he calls 'active luck' (as opposed to blind or random luck, such as being born to rich parents). "It's about the interaction of randomness and human action," he says. For example, exploiting chance encounters or seeing the associations between different ideas or people. To help get into this kind of generally positive mindset, Wiseman recommends spending a few moments each night jotting down the most positive thing that has happened to you in the last 24 hours and one thing in your life for which you have a sense of gratitude. "Over time, this journal becomes a source of evidence of the more positive things in a person's life and can help to change [your] attitude," he says.

But, as we've heard, thinking positively isn't enough on its own to help you achieve your aspirations. "Nobody gets lucky just by sitting on the couch manifesting something. It'll take work," says Busch. "Shaping your reality is a mix between imagining a future, thinking positively and visualising how it's possible, and then executing."

THE WOOP APPROACH

One of the leading researchers on effective goal setting and fulfilment is Gabriele Oettingen, Professor of Psychology at

"WOOP IS A FRIEND HELPING YOU TO MASTER THE BUMPY WAY TOWARD FULFILLING YOUR WISHES"

New York University. Contrary to the message of manifesting, her research has shown that simply visualising what you want to achieve isn't enough and can backfire by encouraging false confidence and complacency. Instead, she's shown the importance of 'mental contrasting', which is about paying attention to all the potential practical obstacles standing between where you are now and where you'd like to get to. She's translated her research into an accessible programme called WOOP, which stands for Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan.

The basic idea is to spend some time deciding on a specific Wish (a particular goal or outcome you want to achieve), then imagining and visualising what your life will look like if you achieve that Outcome (this will help boost your motivation). Next you consider any actual or potential Obstacle in your path, and finally craft a realistic 'if/then'-based Plan for how you'll deal with the obstacle (an 'if/then' plan takes the form of "if X happens, then I'll do Y").

“Manifestation won’t make your dreams come true and people might feel like failures when manifestation doesn’t work for them,” says Oettingen. “We need to actively go the cumbersome way to wish fulfilment. WOOP is a friend helping you to master the bumpy way toward fulfilling your wishes and dreams.”

DIFFERENT MINDSETS

The appeal of manifesting is easy to see – you can get what you want without moving a muscle. In contrast, if we follow the psychologists’ advice, things are bound to get messy at some point. It’s going to take effort and inevitably there’ll be some proverbial mountains to climb. How can we stay determined and motivated rather than clicking on another misleading manifestation video?

The real psychology of positive mindsets can help here, thanks to a distinction – widely deployed in sports – between seeing hurdles as a threat or challenge. Prof Marc Jones is a sports and exercise psychologist at Manchester Metropolitan University and he explains it like this: “Individuals who have a challenge mindset... have greater levels of perceived control and are focused on what can be achieved, while those with a threat mindset have lower levels of perceived control and are focused on what might go wrong.”

Some ways to foster a challenge mindset include focusing on things you can control in a given situation and reminding yourself of times that you’ve done well in the past. You could even use written or spoken affirmations to remind yourself of past successes, of the training and preparation you put in, and the deeper reasons underlying why you’re doing what you’re doing. “A challenge mindset is associated with a number of benefits,” says Jones, “including a more helpful emotional state for performance and greater task engagement – for example, a soccer player may call for the ball more often and get involved in the game as much as possible.”

There are parallels here with other mindsets recognised by psychology, such as a ‘growth mindset’, which is when you see people’s abilities as malleable, as opposed to innate and fixed; a ‘mastery mindset’, which is seeing a challenge as a chance to learn and practise; and a ‘performance mindset’, which is when you’re fixated on the outcome rather than the process. These various forms of positive mindset will help you get through difficult times, learn through failure and, paradoxically, even though you’re less outcome-obsessed, make it more likely that you’ll achieve your goals.

It’s going to be harder than a few minutes of manifestation-based meditation, but far more likely to be effective. Remember, effort and persistence will be key. “It’s not enough just to think positively,” says Dutton, you also need to “act positively, and act persistently positively.”