"Positive thinking" has become a buzzword recommended by many people, including mental health professionals. When people are depressed or anxious, friends and loved ones often say, "think positive." Though the concept is attractive, positive thinking is actually counter-productive for about 25% of American adults.

One of the principal researchers who has challenged the wholesale marketing of positive thinking is Julie Norem. We acknowledge our bias. Julie is Ken's daughter. She has studied and researched motivation and personality psychology for over 25 years. According to Julie "Accentuating the positive is not bad advice, but it suffers from the same problem that plagues one-size-fits-all clothing."

She has suggested that some people prepare for stressful situations by anticipating possible negative outcomes. She calls this approach for managing anxiety, fear, and worry defensive pessimism. It is described in Julie's book *The Positive Power of Negative Thinking.*

People approach tasks in different ways. Telling individuals who rely on defensive pessimism to relax because everything will work out just doesn't work. In fact when they try to adopt a positive outlook they often become more anxious. People who use defensive pessimism actually acknowledge and employ anxiety. They think about possible negative outcomes to calm themselves. They prepare for situations by setting low expectations. They anticipate things that may go wrong. However, they don't stop with the anticipation and engage in worrying. Rather, they figure out ways to avoid or cope with the potential catastrophe. That gives them a sense of control.

Defensive pessimism is not the same as seeing a glass as half empty rather than half full. Defensive pessimists don't expect the worst. They just prepare for the worst by planning responses to all the "worsts" they imagine. People who naturally use the strategy of defensive pessimism are less successful when they attempt to adopt an approach of strategic optimism.

So, what about the people who approach a task with optimism and without anxiety? When they approach a task with optimism and strategically plan for ways to succeed, they usually do well. The strategy of defensive pessimism would probably make them anxious. People who naturally use a strategic optimism approach are less successful when they attempt to adopt a defensive pessimism strategy.

People can successfully approach a task with either optimism or pessimism. Do what works for you! Remember strategic planning is an important factor for achieving success whether you rely on optimism or defensive pessimism, and defensive pessimism may be a more effective and efficient way to proceed for people who are anxious.

Do you think you might be a defensive pessimist (like Sandy)? You might be interested in a questionnaire and additional information that is available on line.

You can Google “defensive pessimism” or visit http://www.defensivepessimism.com
http://www.wordspy.com/words/defensivepessimism.asp
http://www.wellesley.edu/Psychology/Norem/Research/research.html.