TECH & SCIENCE

THE 'TYRANNY' OF POSITIVE THINKING CAN THREATEN YOUR HEALTH AND HAPPINESS

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The adaptation of positive psychology for business management and the armed forces has helped the approach spread into popular culture. But as it's grown more and more popular, positive psychology has taken on a new tone—one with a more simplistic message of "positive thinking."

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TECH & SCIENCE HAPPINESS

Everyone has heard "Just look on the bright side!" or "Happiness is a choice—so choose to be happy!" Countless self-help books on choosing happiness line the shelves of bookstores; *You Are a Badass* by Jen Sincero has been on the *New York Times* best-seller list for 32 weeks; and *The Power of Positive Thinking* by the Reverend Norman Vincent Peale, published in 1952 and translated into 15 languages, is still popular today. The idea that you can be happy if you simply choose to be has been integrated into America's military, classrooms and workplaces to improve coping skills, performance and mental health.

But as the movement's popularity grew, it started being used to shame people with depression, anxiety or even occasional negative feelings. The August and October issues of *Motivation and Emotion*, the official journal of the Society for the Study of Motivation, have studies that prove the shaming is real. The study from the August issue, conducted by Karin Coifman and colleagues, concluded that when people acknowledge and address negative emotions toward their relationships or chronic illnesses, it helps them adjust their behavior and have more appropriate responses. Those negative emotions, in turn, benefit their overall psychological health. The October study, conducted by Elizabeth Kneeland and colleagues, concluded that people who think emotions are easily influenced and changeable are more likely to blame themselves for the negative emotions they feel than people who think emotions are fixed and out of their control.

While these studies are important, they aren't the first to suggest positive psychology can be dangerous. For years, psychologists have been studying emotions and how they affect everyday life, success and self-esteem. These studies found that even though positive psychology can help some people achieve happiness, it can be harmful to others, leading to feelings of failure and depression.

Despite these recent findings and years of research pointing out the negatives of positive psychology, the infatuation lives on. Some experts believe bombarding people with these bromides and self-help books that implicitly say they are at fault for not being happy may be a factor in the rise of depression rates in the U.S.

Positive psychology's approach to mental health management has its roots in the humanistic psychology developed by Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers in the 1950s. The term "positive psychology" first appeared in *Motivation and Personality* , Maslow's 1954 book, as the title of a chapter that states, "The science of psychology has been far more successful on the negative than on the positive side; it has revealed to us much about man's shortcomings, his illnesses, his sins, but little about his potentialities, his virtues, his achievable aspirations, or his full psychological height. It is as if psychology had voluntarily restricted itself to only half its rightful jurisdiction, and that the darker, meaner half."

The tenets of positive psychology were codified in the positive psychology movement, established in part by former American Psychological Association President Martin E.P. Seligman in 1998. Positive psychology was featured in *The Washington Post* in 2002, made the cover of *Time* and was featured in Britain's *Sunday Times Magazine* in 2005 and *The New York Times Magazine* in 2007; in 2006, it was the subject of a six-part BBC series. Seligman's positive psychology book, *Character Strengths and Virtues,* has been cited by over 4,000 publications since its publication.

Since 2009, the Penn Resilience Program, run by the U.S. Army's Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness program, has been widely used to help soldiers and family members develop coping skills and behaviors, increase capability, ensure education about and promotion of preventive measures that encourage self-awareness, deter high-risk behaviors and support healthy alternatives that produce positive outcomes. The Penn Resilience Program has trained more than 30,000 Army soldiers on how to teach the resilience skills to tens of thousands of other soldiers.

Seligman runs the University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center, which is the training hub of the program's Master Resilience Training program for noncommissioned officers.

In 2012, psychologist Neil Frude co-founded a company called the Happiness Consultancy to help boost levels of happiness, well-

being and resilience in company workforces. Over a year, every member of a company working with Frude does a four-week course in positive psychology. Frude told Fast Company Inc.'s Co.Create site that positive psychology has been adopted as a management tool by many Fortune 500 companies in recent years.

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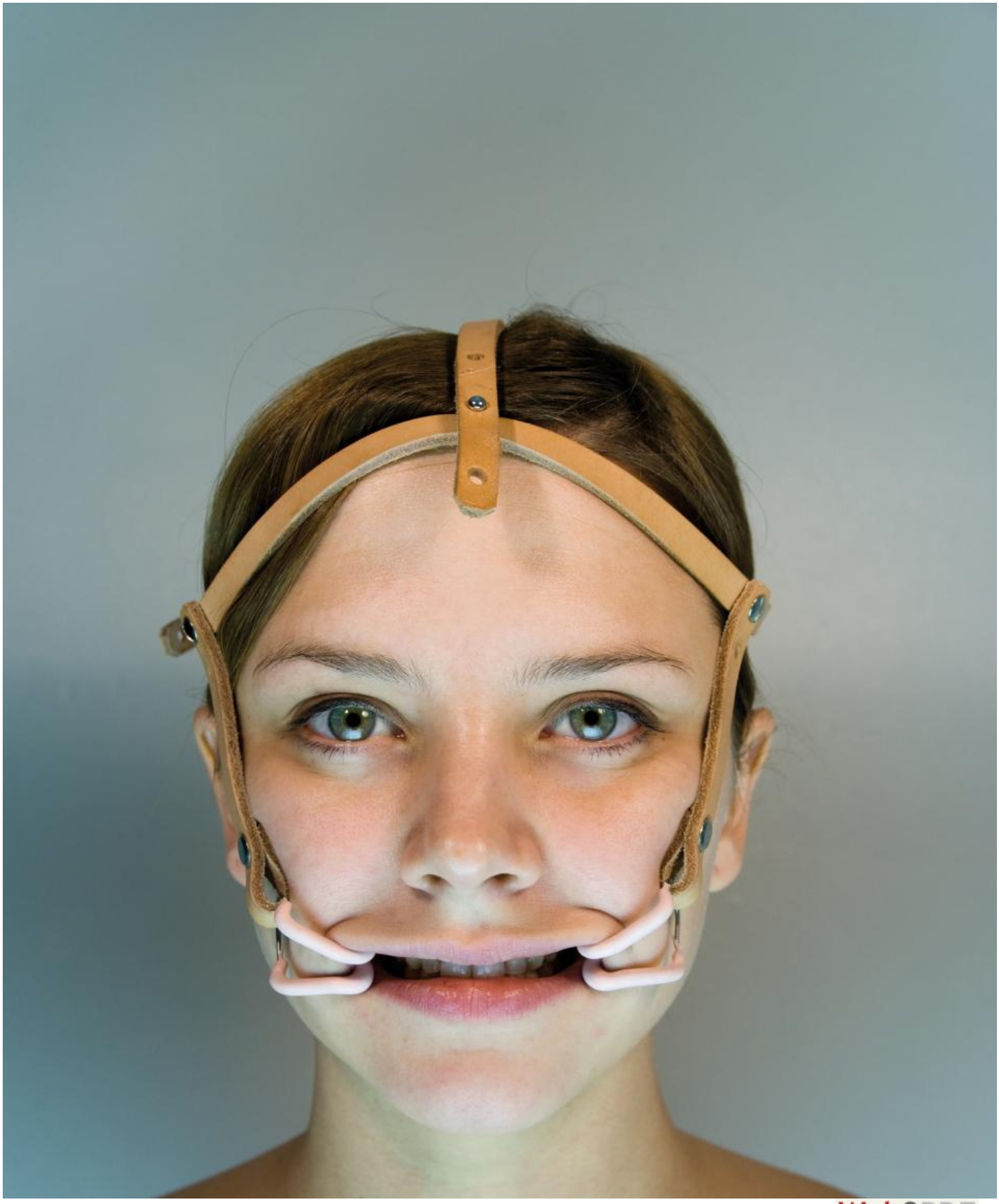

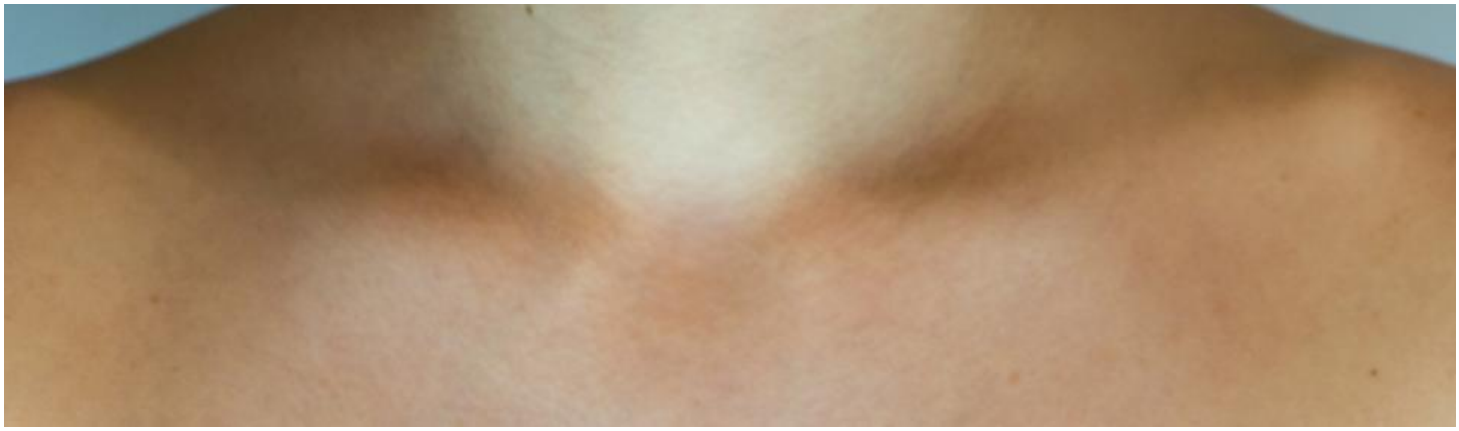

An art piece on forced positivity by Arnika Müll entitled "Happy, happy, joy, joy."

A R N I K A M Ü L L

Julie Norem, a psychology professor at Wellesley College, says that badly executed studies published in the name of positive psychology started showing up in many places after Seligman coined the term. Most of these claimed that optimism and positive thinking led to a happy life. But, as social psychologist Carol Tavris has argued, most of these studies have been shot down by better studies.

In recent years, critics have become concerned that this simplistic form of positive psychology can do more harm than good. It's "the tyranny of the positive attitude," says Barbara Held, a psychology professor at Bowdoin College. "By TPA, I mean that our culture has little tolerance for those who can't smile and look on the bright side in the face of adversity." Even in cases of profound loss, Held says, people are supposed to get over their sadness within weeks, if not sooner. "The TPA has two component parts: First, you feel bad about whatever pain has come your way, then you are made to feel guilty or defective if you can't be grateful for what you do have, move forward [or] focus on the positives. This is the double punch, and it's the second part that does the most serious damage."

Research bears that out. A 2012 study undertaken at the University of Queensland and published in the journal *Emotion* found that when people think others expect them to not feel negative emotions, they end up feeling *more* negative emotions. A 2009 study published in *Psychological Science* found that forcing people to use positive statements such as "I'm a lovable person" can make some feel more insecure. Further, New York University psychology professor Gabriele Oettingen and her colleagues have found that visualizing a successful outcome, under certain conditions, can make people less likely to achieve it.

Researchers have also found that people in a negative mood produce better quality and more persuasive arguments than people in a positive mood, and that negative moods can improve memory.

Norem is working to understand why some people don't respond well to positive psychology and respond better to negativity—an attitude she calls "defensive pessimism." Her studies show that by thinking about everything that could go wrong and processing these negative possibilities, defensive pessimists relieve anxiety and are often able to avoid those pitfalls. Several studies suggest that forcing optimism or a positive mood on an anxious defensive pessimist can damage performance on tasks ranging from solving math problems to playing darts.

"The majority of positive psychology interventions are designed to help make people feel better, to improve their mood," says Norem. "Just trying to raise the mood of people who are anxious may make them temporarily feel better, but it tends to lead to poor performance because it doesn't make their anxiety go away. The anxiety is there and has to be dealt with." And for some, defensive pessimism is what helps them deal. Norem believes that 25 to 30 percent of the American population consists of defensive pessimists—but it's not just the defensive pessimists who suffer from culture's interpretation of positive psychology.

"Catchphrases like 'It's all good' shut down conversation about how people are really feeling," says Norem. "If they're having a bad day, it would really help to talk to their friends about it, but this whole idea of 'We have to be positive all the time' has saturated society, and there's no audience."

Another potential hazard of positive thinking is denial. Barbara Ehrenreich, the award-winning journalist and author of *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking Is Undermining America,* partly blames the 2008 economic crisis on people's refusal to consider negative outcomes, like mortgage defaults. Psychiatrist Dr. Mark Banschick argues that positive thinking can become a way of

avoiding necessary action. People might say everything is fine even when it isn't and avoid fixing the problems in their lives. Beth Azar wrote in an article published by the American Psychological Association that there is a widespread and overblown confidence in the power of the positive, including the misperception that people can stave off illness with optimism.

The best way to combat the TPA, Held and Norem say, is to acknowledge that there are no simple answers to the complex problems people face—especially the all-encompassing and ongoing pursuit of happiness.

Most important, people need to realize that there is nothing wrong with feeling bad when life takes dark turns. "It's OK not to be positive all the time, and it's unrealistic to believe that you can be happy every moment," Norem says. "That's not a character failing; that's a full emotional life."