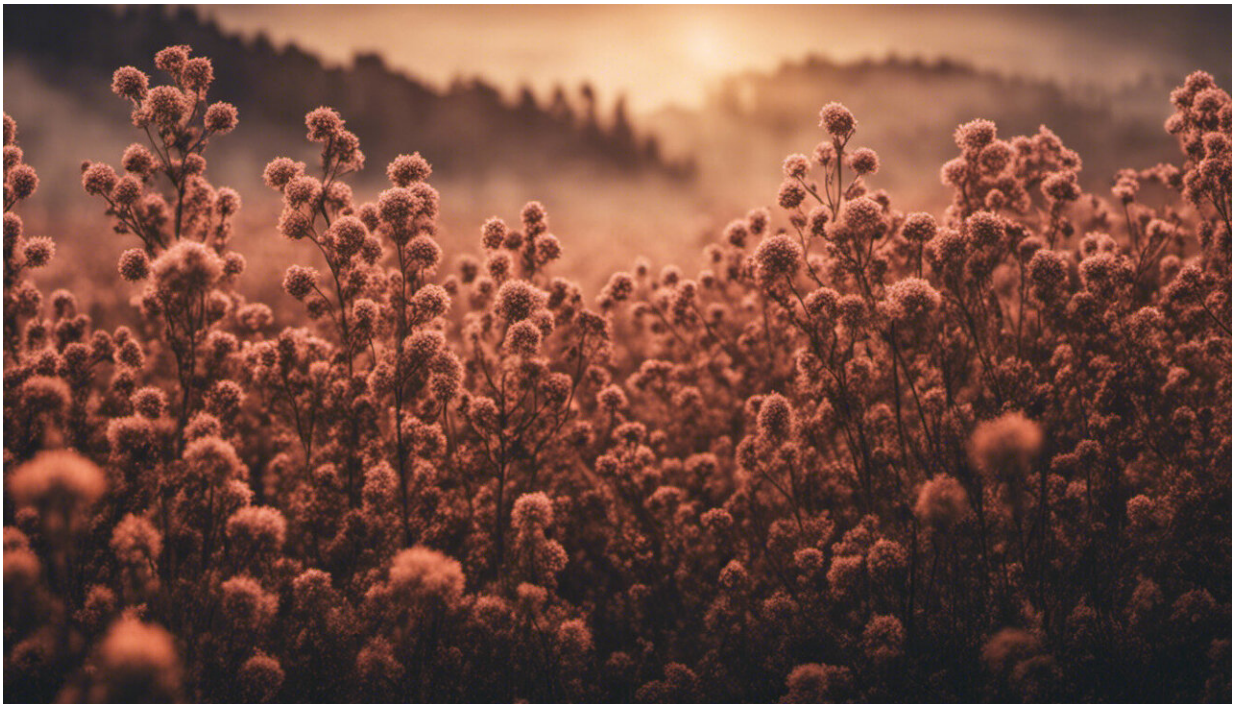


Is it lonelier at the bottom or at the top? Psychologist links ambition to mental health

December 22 2014, by Yasmin Anwar



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The indomitable human quest for power, influence and a foothold in the social hierarchy has long been a subject of fascination and study for UC Berkeley psychologist Sheri Johnson.

"Some people really want to get to the top and others are happy in the

middle, and others are just trying to avoid being at the bottom," says Johnson in a Q & A [published](#) in The Huffington Post.

Johnson and fellow researchers Eliot Tang-Smith of the University of Miami and Stephen Chen of Wellesley College just published a paper in the British [journal](#), *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, showing that feelings of self-worth, whether one seeks power or is uncomfortable with it, can influence our mental health.

In her conversation with Huffington Post reporter Carolyn Gregoire, Johnson talks about the psychological blowback of investing heavily in the attainment of power and influence, and how gauging such traits as ruthless ambition or, conversely, discomfort with power is key in diagnosing such psychopathologies as anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder and narcissistic personality disorder.

"People who put their value on a set of goals related to attaining power—and then experience a profound sense of subordination and not making it to those goals—are at high risk for [anxiety and depression](#)," Johnson says.

Extrinsic vs. intrinsic ambitions

Different people have different priorities and motivations, Johnson points out. For example, intrinsic motivations might be "I want to be very close to people. I want to feel like my life has meaning. I want to feel like I'm doing something good for the universe'," she says.

"Extrinsic ambitions might be things like 'I want to make sure that I'm wealthier than other people. 'I want to be viewed by others as having influence and power'."

In answer to the question, "Are people who are more invested in power more likely to suffer from mental health problems?" Johnson says

"Certainly that story holds for people with anxiety and depression. For narcissism, we're not as sure which direction it plays out ... We do know that this is a group where it seems very important to people to attain [power](#) ... And with people with [bipolar disorder](#), we know that if they really value the pursuit of fame and money, they are more likely to have worse symptoms over time. It's not a good focus for them."

As for treatment avenues, Johnson cites the work of British clinical psychologist Paul Gilbert, founder of compassion-focused therapy, which helps people be more accepting and kind to themselves.

"Sometimes, you're not giving yourself enough compassion and enough room to pursue the things that are really intrinsically meaningful to you," Johnson says.

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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