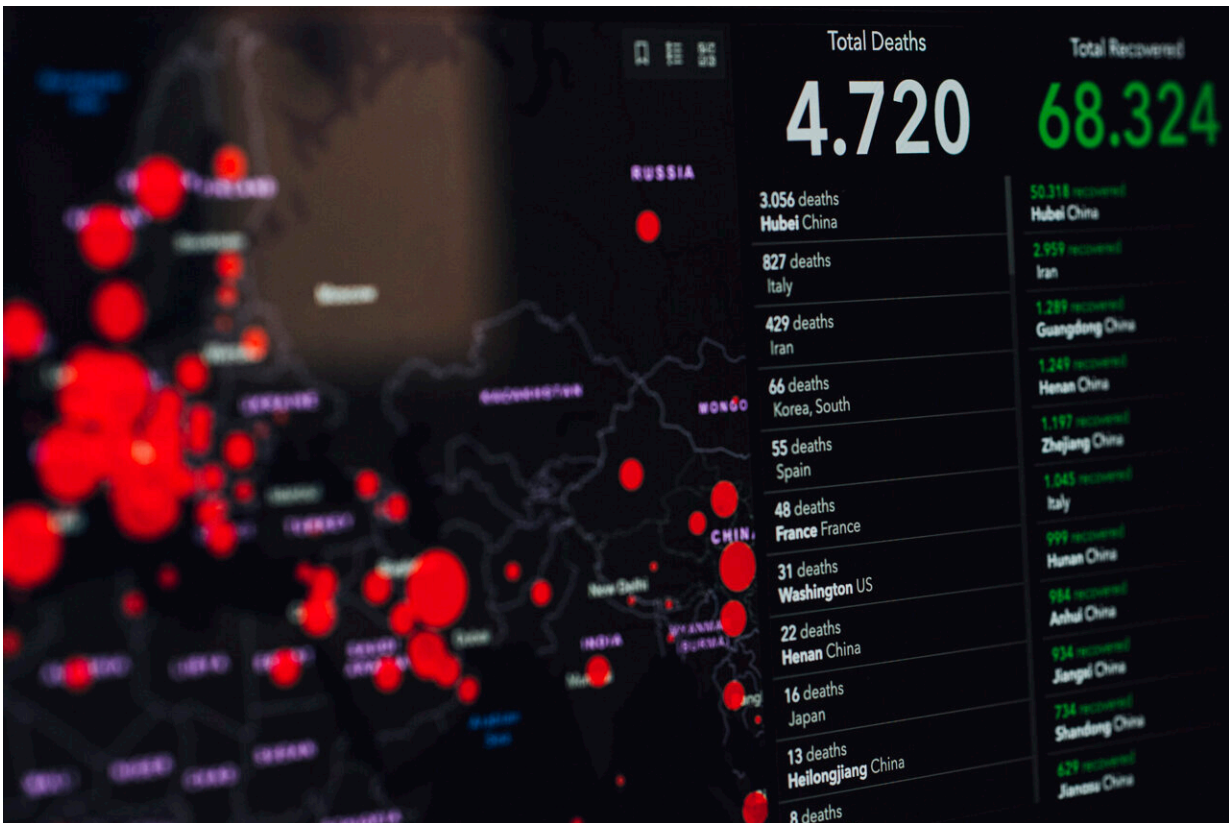


# Why optimism can be dangerous during a pandemic

October 22 2020, by Christian Van Nieuwerburgh



Credit: Markus Spiske from Pexels

For those of us who insist on seeing the glass half full, even when the miserable brigade point out that it's also half empty, COVID-19 poses particular challenges.

In regular times, our relentless optimism wins us friends and provides us with a [host of benefits](#) including higher levels of [wellbeing](#), [increased resilience](#) and [better health](#). Normally, the only downsides relate to minor setbacks when things don't turn out the way we would like and the mild irritation of grumpy colleagues when we're chirpy at work.

Now, things are very different. During a pandemic, we need to act as though it's likely we will get COVID-19 in order to keep ourselves safe and avoid spreading the disease to others. So what is an optimist to do?

## Looking on the bright side

My definition of optimism is "the belief that things will go well in the absence of sufficient evidence to support this view".

As a fervent optimist, I have experienced the benefits (and minor pitfalls) for myself. I am more likely to assume that it will be sunny on the day I am planning a barbecue, which means that we have some amazing meals in the garden, but I have no plan B prepared in case it rains. I'm more likely to set off on long distances on my motorcycle, which means some wonderfully adventurous rides to beautiful places, but I will be in trouble if I ever break down or have a flat tire because I won't have planned for it.

Whether we are generally optimistic or pessimistic can have a significant effect on our wellbeing. It seems logical that focusing on what is working can lead to more positive emotions and increased satisfaction with life, and this is [supported](#) by [research](#).

## The dark side of optimism

In a pandemic, optimism has a dark side. In situations where danger is

present, excessive optimism (sometimes called irrational or [unrealistic optimism](#)) can have severe negative consequences. What is normally a strength of optimists ([risk taking](#)) becomes a dangerous weakness.

Because we believe that things will work out well even where there is little evidence to support this perspective, we tend to [minimize risks](#), underestimate costs and ignore warning signs. We might misjudge our vulnerability to COVID-19, believing without justification that we are less likely to catch it.

We also might be less cautious when walking into crowded spaces and less motivated to obey restrictions. Even when we catch the virus, we're more likely to believe that it is "just a cold" and so more likely to continue going about our daily routines. By doing this we are putting ourselves and others at risk. And the consequences can be deadly.

## **What can we do to moderate our optimism?**

Optimists need to rein themselves in a bit during this crisis. But how? A good way to check if we are being excessively optimistic is to ask ourselves: what evidence do I have to support my prediction? If there isn't any basis for our assumption that, for example, we won't get [coronavirus](#) by entering a closed, crowded space for a long time, we should think about changing our behavior.

Another strategy is to compare our predictions to what experts, specialists and commentators are saying. According to the theory of "[optimistic explanatory style](#)", an optimistic response arises when a person believes that a negative event is external (caused by someone or something else), that it is unstable (not likely to persist over time), and that it is local (only relates to a particular situation). So it would be helpful for us to challenge our thinking. To what extent are the current restrictions about me versus other people? How long is the pandemic

likely to be with us? To what extent is COVID-19 a local issue?

As optimists, our [natural inclination](#) is not to spend too much time on questions like this. But if we want to moderate our optimism, we must set aside time to think about these things and discuss our ideas with others.

## **How to govern for optimists**

In ambiguous situations, optimists tend to gravitate towards the most positive interpretation of the rules. In situations where confusion reigns due to constantly changing regulations, we will come to our own conclusions. When rules come with exceptions, we will assume that these exceptions apply to us.

UK [guidelines on social distancing](#), for example, say we should stay two meters apart unless we have a face covering "or other precautions" in place, in which case the distance is reduced to one meter. To an optimist, that means that we should stay one meter apart, not the full two. For the messaging to be most useful for optimists, it should be clear and unambiguous. "Stay two meters apart" is better for optimists than giving a range.

If tight restrictions are eased, as they were over summer in many places, optimists start believing the risk has subsided and the crisis will soon be over. But as we have seen subsequently, that initial optimism has led a second wave, with many local regions and entire countries heading back into various forms of lockdown. Rather than continually changing the guidelines, sending mixed messages about the level of risk and imposing different rules in different regions, governments should put out explicit and unambiguous regulations that are consistently applied if they want to influence the behavior of optimists.

## Optimal optimism

For optimists, the question now is how we can benefit from our tendency towards seeing the upside of life while minimizing any risk to ourselves or others. It is important to retain our generalized optimism that we will be able to overcome this challenging time and remain positive as we do so.

At the same time, we should intentionally seek other perspectives and talk to others about our automatic responses to the pandemic. We must dedicate time to weighing up the risks and consequences of our behavior without being drawn into extended rumination or falling into pessimism.

If we can do this, I am cautiously optimistic that we can protect ourselves and others while bringing positivity and hope to our societies.

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