

**Work in Progress**

Published monthly by Michele Crawford

Work in Progress is an electronic newsletter intended to assist individuals seeking optimum well-being.

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Feature Article: Pollyanna, Scrooge and Gandhi: The differences between idealism, pessimism and optimism.

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1) Note from Michele

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Dear Reader

My confession is that I am in recovery. I have been in recovery for almost fifteen years. I am a recovering idealist which I know is a very common problem. Idealism is the root of many, some very serious problems.

There is a clear difference between idealism, pessimism and optimism. Each focus brings relevant emotions and consequences, both behavioural and health-related. Pessimists focus on the emptiness of

a glass; optimists direct their attention to the full portion; and idealists believe it SHOULD be full all the time.

In fact, idealists use the word should a lot because their focus is on their expectations rather than reality. That's often the basis of road rage. Idealists have unrealistic expectations about traffic and other drivers which endorses their low frustration tolerance.

Ignoring the price of elevated stress levels, idealists continue to insist on the ideal driving experience. This denies the certainty of congested roadways and the poor driving habits of many people. So day after day, idealists replay the same pattern with no chance of alleviating your bad humor; not as long as you continue to expect unreality.

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2) Feature Article: Pollyanna, Scrooge and Gandhi: The differences between idealism, pessimism and optimism.

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When I was a kid, I had an absolute belief about parsnips. I thought they were an abomination and my idealism (because my mom liked them and put parsnips in the stew) was that I should not have to deal with them, ever. I was always picking them out of my meal and gagging on the ones I missed.

As an adult, following a typical pressure of our society to think positively, let's say I decide to change my attitude about parsnips. So I buy upbeat attitude books, go to counselling and attend affirmative-thinking seminars. I learn to meditate the expression "I love parsnips," "I love parsnips."

After all that work I'm finally ready and I bite into a parsnip. What happens of course is that I still hate them! Now I am angry because of all the wasted energy, time and money. My idealistic thought becomes negative (or unenthusiastic or jaded or spiteful or hopeless): a typical response of idealistic thinkers.

An optimistic thought would have been "Given the reality I hated parsnips, maybe one day I can learn to like them." It is a true fact, especially since I now love many vegetables I hated as a kid. However, since I still hate them, I don't have to waste energy or guilt on unrealistic expectations. Also, if I bite into a parsnip in someone else's stew, I am more resilient and have many strategies to cope.

I saw a woman on TV who was seven months pregnant when her husband was killed in the towers on 9/11. With considerable strain in her voice she said she was trying to think positively. What heartbreaking pressure that would be.

If I could have talked to her, I would have said something like "Given the reality of everything that has happened, how ARE you doing?" I believe she would have relaxed, thought about it, and said "Given the reality of all that has happened, I'm doing as good as can be expected and I have hope it will get better." A reality-based belief brings much better results.

## Idealism

Idealism focuses on the ideal: justice, fairness, integrity and righteousness. Since reality doesn't always fit those standards, idealists spend a lot of time in anger, hurt, feeling betrayed and denied, repeating the same relationship problems, being stuck in victim ideation, feeling smug and superior... you get the idea.

Because idealists expect positive outcomes, you don't have an adaptive back-up plan when things go awry and the pattern tends to repeat and repeat and repeat. For example, if you believe friends should treat you the way you treat them, with respect, consideration and fairness, then you will have a hard time recovering from shock when they don't.

After the shock wears off, you may take an extreme reaction: either throw the friendship away completely or return to the relationship with smiles hiding animosity. Either way, there is no discussion to solve the problem because idealists expect it to never happen again.

Even more confusing, idealists profoundly believe your thoughts are righteous, even sacrosanct. This concentration on the belief versus consequences does not permit any insight for why these consequences exist and repeat. Years ago, the noble belief "marriage vows are sacred" stopped many women from leaving violent relationships. Without context, this conviction looks appealing and harmless. But the same belief closes the door to leaving an abusive partner.

Some idealistic first-line responders believed white American males shouldn't park trucks full of explosives under a day-care. The warped sense of idealism that terrorists hold dictates the reality of doing just that.

Because their belief system would not allow for such an event, many rescuers developed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is embedded in shattered global (idealistic) beliefs about identity, justice, trust, abandonment and safety. Idealism had a greater impact on the fallout than the Oklahoma bombing.

Idealism is the basis of many issues and comes in many packages. Examples are perfectionism, codependency and other dependencies, denial, right-thinking, stereotyping and discrimination, black and white thinking, stubbornness, unrealistic control issues, immaturity, judgmental opinions and labelling, strained relationships, impatience and over-reactions and so many more!

### Pessimism

Pessimism is the starting point of worrying, ruminating, vindictiveness, bitterness, wallowing, aggression, unworthiness, conflict, unhappiness, being in a constant state of grief, and on and on.

When you deeply believe you do not deserve to be happy, you may feel more in control by assuming the worst before (you presume) it happens. Pessimism may appear to provide you with a wall of protection from disappointment, betrayal, loss and rejection but it also shuts out intimacy, joy, human connection, contentment, anticipation and peace.

### Optimism

Optimism always starts with acknowledging the reality of the situation and then focusing on the premise "everything happens for the best." Even tragedy can be placed in the context of focusing on the good that can come from it. Katrina and 911 and other terrible events all have gifts and benefits that we can learn from to make future catastrophes less terrible.

Aggravations can be improved by focusing on two or three good things that are connected with results. Ask yourself what are two good things that can come of failing an exam, losing your luggage, missing the bus, too much rain and so on. This exercise will bring positive outcomes no matter what occurs.

Optimists by definition focus on options, problem-solving, goal-setting, moving forward, letting go and forgiveness, resiliency and flexibility,

making the best of a bad situation, have mature responses: the list is endless.

Research tells us optimists have stronger relationships, better health and live happier, longer lives.

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3) About Michele  
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Michele Crawford is a therapist who assists individuals who are struggling with trauma, anxiety or depression. Her passion for her work remains embedded in being able to connect with you in your suffering, helping you find real solutions no matter how complex the issue may be.

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4) Counselling Services  
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Are you prepared to live with more happiness, optimism, confidence, self-worth and hope? If your answer is "yes," then your next step is to contact me for a free 20-minute phone consultation. We can then discuss how I might best help you resolve your problems of Trauma, Depression and Anxiety.

The benefits of counselling with Michele include: significantly reduced stress levels, an optimistic outlook in life, increased confidence and hope.

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