

USE YOUR DELUSION

A NEUROSCIENTIST ON HOW CHEERFUL PEOPLE DECEIVE THEMSELVES.

BY MOSHE BAR

Imagine that you could only think for very short intervals, like the character in the Kurt Vonnegut story "Harrison Bergeron," who was fitted with a device that broke his concentration every 20 seconds. In such a world, people with above-average smarts could not develop deep thoughts, and mental lives would remain superficial.

We are already living in such a distracted world. Some of the distraction is

external and stems from the availability of electronic connectivity, which may provide short-term thrills but in the long term is a handicap for intellectual depth. (It is not clear that Leonardo da Vinci would have created the *Mona Lisa* had he owned an iPhone.) But there is a more profound source of distraction in our lives, which is harder to recognize because it is coming from deep inside our brain.

Human thought is broadly associative. We tend to switch from one thought to another frequently and seamlessly. In fact, research suggests our brains are wired to reward us for such associative thinking with positive mood and punish us for stagnant thinking

by depressing us. So the healthy, typical thinking pattern jumps all day. That makes us creative, but it also robs us of extended stretches of thinking that could possibly take us somewhere interesting.

One way to stay put mentally is to be depressed. The hallmark of depression is a thinking pattern called rumination, a cyclical repetition that focuses on one topic, such as a rude remark from last night. It turns out that in some cognitive tasks, depressed individuals perform better than healthy participants. They seem to see reality in a more accurate manner than the non-depressed. This controversial but intriguing phenom-

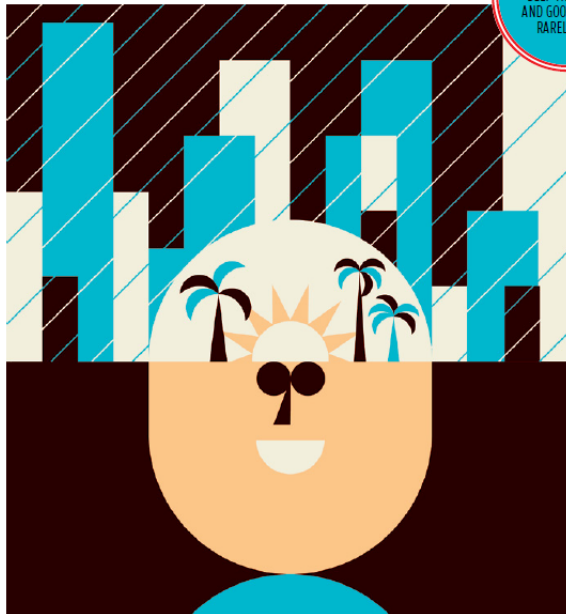
enon is sometimes called "depressive realism."

In one of the first experiments from which the concept has emerged, healthy and mildly depressed individuals were asked to press a button that sometimes did (and sometimes did not) seem to operate a light bulb. When asked how much control they thought they had over the light, the non-depressed participants thought they had about 75 percent control. The depressed reported that they had none, and they were right—the button was not even connected to the light.

Happy people tend to maintain a state of self-deception that includes a positive exaggeration of their view of themselves, their environment, and what will happen in the future. There are two main possible explanations for why we've evolved this way. One is that nature does not "want" us to dwell on the fact that we are all going to die. The other possible explanation, perhaps less bleak, is that this is nature's way of making us productive, crafty, and exploratory. Your thinking flows forward, busy and not stagnant? Good, you will be rewarded with the neurotransmitters of better mood. Your mind is fixated on the same point for long durations? It's depression for you.

As Joseph Conrad famously observed, action is the enemy of thought and the friend of flattering illusions. By being busy and constantly moving forward in our minds and actions, we are good, productive,

THE TAKE-AWAY
DEEP THOUGHTS AND GOOD MOODS RARELY MIX.



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HAPPINESS
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PAINT SOME HAPPY LITTLE TREES

METHODS Boston College researchers showed three groups a film clip about concentration camps. One was asked to draw a picture of their mood, one a happy picture, and one to do some unrelated task.

RESULTS Participants who drew happy pictures were in better spirits afterward than the ones who used the art supplies to vent their sadness and anger. On *Mad Men*, Don Draper doodles a noose during a meeting. Look how well that's working for him.

*SHORT-TERM MOOD REPAIR THROUGH ART-MAKING: POSITIVE EMOTION IS MORE EFFECTIVE THAN VENTING, MOTIVATION AND EMOTION

somewhat robotic citizens who sacrifice perception of reality in return for better mood. But occasionally resisting our natural tendency for associative thoughts and the ensuing short-term mood benefits and, instead, delving deeper into our mental world could pay off manifold in the longer run. Try it. If you can.

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