

## Burkeman Sample Essay #11

In response to the first essay question, regarding why negative visualization is more likely to lead to happiness than positive visualization, I would first make the argument that happiness isn't the goal of negative visualization as much as the mitigation of discomfort and unhappiness is. As the text stated in its third paragraph, the Stoics, who proported the benefits of negative visualization, didn't seek happiness, instead searching for tranquility – a calmness and a kind of indifference towards pain meant to make it more manageable. Stoics do not seek to inspire joy; they instead mean to temper themselves to the inevitable misfortunes of a life.

That being said, Burkeman's argument is that negative visualization will lead to a more comfortable life because, instead of either letting oneself rise to unrealistic optimism bound for disappointment, or sink to grim depths of anxiety regarding the as-of-yet unknown pains of the future, a focus on negative events in one's life, retrospectively for the past and practically theoretical for the future, will lead to both a constructive reflection on the past and a realistic limit on one's pessimism for the future.

I think, with regards to Burkeman's interpretation of Stoic views, that the practice of negative visualization is a constructive and useful habit, in moderation. Most of the points Burkeman made are valid: both flagrant optimism and prospective anxiety are negative forces in one's life, both of which can be ruinous and both of which can be reigned in by an exercise in negative visualization. When one takes time to reflect on past failures and meditate on the possibility of future ones, I think one is likely to avoid some of those eventualities and be prepared for those that do arrive.

However, I cannot say that a constant practice of negative visualization is a way that I'd want to live. With full realization that some others may view life differently, therefore being more receptive to constant negative visualization, I believe that such a lifestyle would lead to a loss of some of the inherent uncertainty of life, which I think is the root of some of life's joys. For example: if I were to constantly ponder the multitudes of discomforts that may descend on my life, what time would I have to consider the brighter objects of my future, or to enjoy the moment in which I'd be living? Certainly, while flagrant and unrealistic optimism can be harmful in that it leads to great disappointment, I believe that a life lived without optimism of some kind is a fundamentally unhappy life. After all, would you want to contemplate only the negative events that may fill the remainder of your life?

With regards to a negative visualization's mitigation of anxiety, while that is largely a good thing, I think that a life lived devoid of anxiety is an unhealthy one. Anxiety, after all, is a sort of survival instinct—it keeps us alert to the proverbial puma,

that unseen force in the unknown of life ahead, preparing us to recoil when unhappiness pounces. Negative visualization practices serve that purpose as well, although I think that such practices are most effective when tempered by a healthy dose of the primal sort of anxiety humans are hardwired to feel.

At its core, my argument rests on the thought that the Stoic idea of tranquility, while far above the worst state of being, is not equivalent to happiness, the state we fundamentally strive to be in, the ideal place we can be standing in life. While Stoic practices can help us be realistic, thereby being a tool with which to achieve happiness, to live by a Stoic philosophy is to never take risks, to never hope freely, to never gamble in hopes of a happier life. These actions, to me, constitute a good deal of the vibrancy and zest of life, a part of the inherent beauty of the human condition. I think that while a moderate approach utilizing negative visualization and more general Stoic practices can be constructive, a truly happy life is one lived by a person willing to have a little hope, a little uncertainty.

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**SCORE:** This essay received a score of 6.

**RUBRIC LANGUAGE:** A 6 paper commands attention by engaging the material in an insightful and mature manner. The response is clear, logical, and convincing. Further, the response is fully developed, relying on well-chosen examples and persuasive reasoning. The 6 paper demonstrates a strong control of language, a fluid use of sophisticated sentences and a notable understanding of the conventions of written English.

**COMMENTARY:** Essay 11 offers a modeling or imitation of what Burkeman has done in his passage. Although there are examples from the writer's own life, the paper unfolds a series of possibilities or alternatives and considers between them. In doing so, the author thinks through the alternatives of positive and negative visualization, for the writer's own life, ultimately rejecting the Stoic ideal of tranquility, and saying that although "*Stoic practices may be constructive,*" the writer prefers "*a truly happy life... lived by a person willing to have a little hope, a little uncertainty.*" This is a paper that in all of its technical aspects-- its language command--is sophisticated and notable.