INTRODUCTORY NOTE: Oliver Burkeman writes on issues in psychology for the British newspaper *The Guardian*. The following passage is adapted from an essay he published in 2012.

THE BENEFITS OF "NEGATIVE VISUALIZATION"

Behind all of the most popular modern approaches to happiness and success is the simple philosophy of focusing on things going right. But ever since the first philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome, a dissenting perspective has proposed the opposite: that it's our relentless effort to feel happy, or to achieve certain goals, that is precisely what makes us miserable. The "negative path" to happiness takes a radically different stance towards those things most of us spend our lives trying hard to avoid. It involves learning to enjoy uncertainty, embracing insecurity, and becoming familiar with failure. In order to be truly happy, it turns out, we might actually need to be willing to experience more negative emotions--or, at the very least, to stop running quite so hard from them.

In the world of self-help, the most overt expression of our obsession with optimism is the technique known as "positive visualization": mentally picture things turning out well, the reasoning goes, and they're far more likely to do so. Yet there are problems with this outlook, aside from just feeling disappointed when things don't turn out well. Over the last few years, the German-born psychologist Gabriele Oettingen and her colleagues have constructed a series of experiments designed to unearth the truth about "positive fantasies about the future." The results are striking: spending time and energy focusing on how well things could go, it has emerged, actually reduces most people's motivation to achieve them. Experimental subjects who were encouraged to think about how they were going to have a particularly high-achieving week at work, for example, ended up achieving less. They seemed, subconsciously, to have confused imagining success with having already achieved it.

It doesn't necessarily follow, of course, that it would be a better idea to switch to "negative visualization" instead. Yet that is precisely one of the conclusions that emerges from Stoicism, a school of philosophy that originated in Athens a few years after the death of Aristotle in 322 B.C., and that came to dominate western thinking about happiness for nearly five centuries. For the Stoics, the ideal state of mind was tranquility--not the excitable cheer that positive thinkers usually seem to mean when they use the word "happiness." And tranquility was to be achieved not by chasing after enjoyable experiences, but by cultivating a kind of calm indifference towards one's circumstances. One way to do this, the Stoics argued, was by turning towards negative emotions and experiences--not shunning them, but examining them closely instead.

When thinking about the future, Stoics such as Seneca often counseled actively dwelling on worst-case scenarios--staring them in the face. Not only does ceaseless optimism make for a greater shock when things go wrong; imagining the worst also brings its own benefits. Psychologists have long agreed that one of the greatest enemies of human happiness is "hedonic adaption" – the predictable and frustrating way in which any new source of pleasure we obtain, whether it's as minor as a new electronic gadget or as major as a marriage, swiftly gets relegated to the backdrop of our lives: we grow accustomed to it, and it ceases to deliver so much joy. It follows, then, that regularly reminding yourself that you might lose any of the things you currently enjoy can reverse that adaption effect. Thinking about the possibility of losing something you value shifts it from the backdrop of your life back to center stage, where it can deliver pleasure once more.

The second, subtler, and arguably more powerful benefit of this kind of negative thinking is as an antidote to anxiety. Consider how we normally seek to assuage worries about the future: we seek reassurance, looking to persuade ourselves that everything will be all right in the end. But offer reassurance to a friend who is in the grip of anxiety, and you'll often find that, a few days later, he'll be back for more. Worse, reassurance can actually exacerbate anxiety. When you reassure your friend that the worst-case scenario he fears probably won't occur, you inadvertently reinforce his belief that it would be catastrophic if it did. You are tightening the coil of his anxiety, not loosening it.

All too often, the Stoics note, things will not turn out for the best. But it is also true that, when they do go wrong, they'll almost certainly go less wrong than you feared. Losing your job is unlikely to condemn you to starvation and death; losing a relationship won't condemn you to a life of unrelenting misery. Those fears are based on irrational judgments about the future. The worst thing about any future event, the Stoic-influenced psychologist Albert Ellis used to say, "is usually your exaggerated belief in its horror." Spend time vividly imagining exactly how wrong things could go in reality, and you'll often turn bottomless, nebulous fears into finite and manageable ones. Happiness reached via positive thinking is fleeting and brittle; negative visualization generates a vastly more dependable calm.

ESSAY TOPIC

According to Burkeman, in what ways is "negative visualization" more likely to make people happier than "positive visualization"? What do you think of his views? Write an essay responding to these two questions. To develop your own position, be sure to discuss your own specific examples; those examples can be drawn from anything you've read, as well as from your observation and experience.