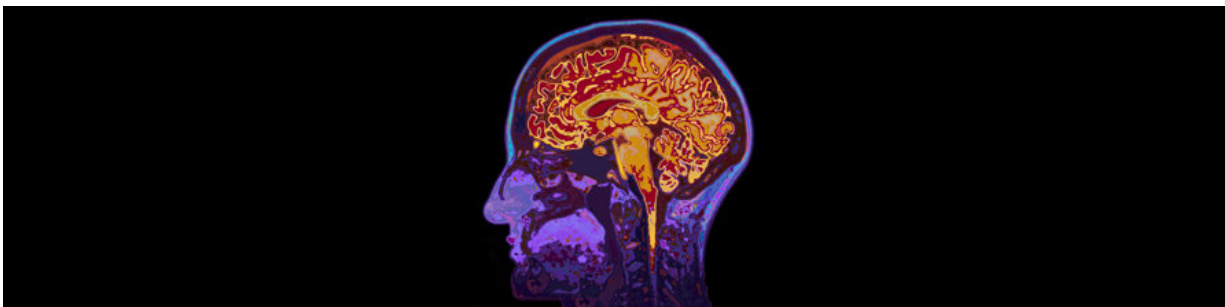


We view ourselves and those we care about through 'rose-tinted glasses', study says

February 2 2018, by George Wigmore



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New research from City, University of London, University of Oxford and Yale University has shown that we see our own lives, and also those we care about, through 'rose-tinted glasses'.

The study, which is the first to show that such an '[optimism bias](#)' extends beyond the self, found that people readily changed their beliefs about a person they like when receiving good [news](#) but barely changed their opinions about them after receiving bad news. This 'vicarious optimism' in their learning about others was found to be stronger the more people cared about another person, and was even seen for strangers.

To examine how far this optimism bias extended, the researchers studied a mechanism known as 'good news/bad news effect' that generates and

protects our optimism.

In life we sometimes change our beliefs about ourselves based on new information we receive. For example, when told we are more intelligent than we thought—good news—we update our beliefs, but if we hear we are less intelligent than we suspected—bad news—we change little. This learning bias appears to arise from the desire to feel good about ourselves and our future.

But we also want to feel good about the future of people we care about. Bad news for people we care about feels dreadful, potentially preventing us from integrating such information into our beliefs about these people. This 'good news/bad news effect' can also tell us how much someone cares about another person, as the more we care about another person, the more likely we are to accept good news about that person and reject bad news.

To test if such an optimism bias extends beyond the self, the researchers recruited more than 1,100 [participants](#) for five studies. In each of these studies, participants imagined a host of negative life events happening to other people, ranging from their friends to strangers. The research is published in the journal *Psychological Science*.

For a friend, for instance, participants imagined a negative life event (losing one's luggage, getting cancer, missing an important meeting...) happening to them. They were then asked to indicate the likelihood of such an event occurring. Following this they were told the actual probability of such an event taking place.

Sometimes, this information was good news – it was lower than participants expected. And other times, this information was bad news – it was higher than they expected. To measure how much people used good and bad news to change their belief about the other person,

participants were then given a second chance to indicate the likelihood of the event occurring to their friend having previously been told the actual probability. The differences between their estimate before and after receiving the news is taken as an index of belief change.

The researchers found that the optimism bias indeed extends beyond the self, and that this effect was stronger the more people cared about another person. If participants, for instance, first read information about a stranger indicating that this person was a good person, they showed subsequently vicarious optimism for that person. However, if they read that a stranger was not a nice person, the vicarious optimism decreased substantially for that person. Finally, the more pronounced the vicarious optimism for a stranger, the more likely participants were to help people similar to that stranger.

Dr. Andreas Kappes, lead author of the study and a lecturer in the Department of Psychology at City, University of London, said, "Our research shows that we see not only our own lives through rose-tinted glasses, but also the lives of those we care about. What we found is that participants showed vicarious optimism when learning about the outcomes affecting others they care about, updating their beliefs less in response to bad news compared to good news. But this optimism did not stop with friends—it also extended to strangers when learning about their future."

Dr. Molly Crockett, senior author of the study and Assistant Professor of Psychology at Yale University, said, "These studies suggest that empathy affects how we learn as well as how we make decisions. Those people with stronger 'vicarious optimism' for strangers were more likely to help a [stranger](#) in need. Concern for others leaves its fingerprints on the beliefs we develop about the world."

Provided by City University London

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