

ANGLO-CHINESE JUNIOR COLLEGE
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GENERAL PAPER

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Paper 2

INSERT

1 hour 30 minutes

READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

This insert contains the passage for Paper 2.

This document consists of **3** printed pages.



Annie Paul explores the changing perceptions towards optimism and pessimism.

- 1 I do not like being commanded to be positive – all the time and no matter the circumstances. Sometimes, smiles just are not what a situation demands. Yet in recent years it feels like we have all been ordered to "think positive" by an army of experts in any number of fields. Doctors inform us that optimism improves our health and helps us live longer, reduces the risk of stroke even. Corporate coaches advise us that optimistic employees earn more money and climb the career ladder more quickly. Positive psychology researchers broadcast studies showing that optimistic people are happier and have more friends. In every way, it seems, optimists bask in the sunshine of the world's approbation, while pessimists mope in the shadows. It has reached the point where people really feel pressure to think and talk in an optimistic way. 5 10
- 2 But a more nuanced view is emerging. Researchers find that optimism and pessimism operate not only as fixed points of view but also as mindsets we can adopt as needed, rose or blue tinted lenses that we can put on and take off depending on the situation. Such a targeted use of optimism may actually be more effective than a blanket policy of all optimism, all the time. Psychologists are even daring to challenge the pre-eminence of optimism as our most sought-after state of mind. They contend that pessimism also has documentable virtues. 15
- 3 Optimism's poor relative, pessimism, is emerging from the shadows. In America, pessimism comes with a deep stigma. For Americans, long-time adherents of the positive-thinking doctrine, pessimism means being a gloomy, dreary, sad-sack loser. But that is not necessarily so. Successful people often employ pessimism in a strategic way to motivate and prepare themselves for the future. It is simply not the case that optimism is "good" and pessimism is "bad" – although that is how we have been encouraged to think about them. Rather, both are functional. And both have value. 20
- 4 If both optimism and pessimism are functional, you may be wondering just what it is that they do. Optimism and pessimism are feelings about the future. They help us manage our expectations and our actions. Because the world is unpredictable, we continually generate mental scenarios about how we think things will unfold, and we colour these scenarios bright or dark, hopeful or fearful. Why not make our forecasts neutral – neither optimistic nor pessimistic but simply realistic? It turns out that optimism and pessimism are not distortions or flaws in our vision (at least, not always), but in fact are enhanced perspectives that give us something more than mere realism can provide. 25 30
- 5 Both optimism and pessimism can act as powerful motivators. If you realistically considered how much risk you were taking on with a new project or acknowledged how much work it would demand, you might never make the attempt. But the energising force of optimism can convince you it will work out, just long enough to turn that prediction into a reality. Likewise, pessimism about a potential outcome can mobilise us to act with alacrity: there is nothing like a looming disaster to make us get things done. The emotional component of optimism and pessimism is what makes them so influential. Usually, we look ahead and anticipate in objective terms what is likely to happen. But optimism and pessimism bring feelings along with them, and those feelings push us into action more forcefully than any rational prediction could. 35 40
- 6 The feelings that come along with optimism and pessimism serve a second function: they help us manage other emotions that might get in the way of our effectiveness. Optimism can act as a bulwark against anxiety; it fills us with an expansive sense of our own power to shape events, overruling the doubts and worries that might otherwise paralyse us into inaction. Optimism can also buoy us up when things go wrong; deluged by feelings of hopelessness and despair, optimism is the raft we cling to until the skies clear. 45

- 7 Although pessimism may seem like an odd choice as an emotional helpmeet, it too can assist us in managing our feelings. By spinning down our expectations, it insulates us from crushing disappointment when things do not go our way. Pessimism is an ego-protection strategy. If you are up for a promotion at work and optimistically believe that you will get it, you will have to absorb a big blow to your self-image and self-esteem when you do not receive it. If you adopt a pessimistic attitude about your chances, however, you will not be nearly so affected emotionally when you lose out as you have predicted. Pessimism can also permit a feeling of delighted relief when, despite our self-protective pessimism, we do manage to get what we want. Optimists never get the joy of a pleasant surprise. 50
- 8 When is pessimism useful? Surprisingly, it can be most helpful at the moments when we might seem to have the least to feel pessimistic about. When we have been successful before and have a realistic expectation of being successful again, we may be lulled into laziness and overconfidence. Pessimism can give us the push that we need to try our best. This phenomenon, known as "defensive pessimism", involves imagining all the things that might go wrong in the future. It spurs us to take action to head off the potential catastrophes we conjure and prevent them from happening. Individuals who employ such a tactic hardly fit the stereotype of sad-sack Eeyores¹ moaning about the gloomy state of the world. The interesting thing about people who engage in defensive pessimism is that they tend to be quite dynamic and successful. They use the technique to motivate themselves to do the very best job they can. 60
- 9 Pessimism can also be an effective motivator when we are faced with an overwhelming or amorphous fear. A feeling of foreboding about an outcome can prompt us to take necessary steps that we would otherwise avoid. Today, many Americans are pessimistic about the much needed economic recovery. But reports show that as a result, they are making smart choices, such as saving money and investing for retirement. Put to use in this fashion, pessimism is not a lamentable drain on our time and energy but a productive strategy for dealing with uncertainty. The phenomenon of defensive pessimism shows that there are times when pessimism and negative thinking are actually features of a positive psychology, since they lead to better performance and personal growth. 70
- 10 In the prosperous and peaceful decade of the 1990s, the upbeat message of positive psychology jibed perfectly with the expansive mood of that period. Today, of course, our frame of mind is very different. Two wars that do not seem to end, an economic recovery that cannot get going, hard choices on every front – all these developments shape a decidedly un-rah-rah mood. Appreciating the value of pessimism and the careful, restrained use of optimism seem consonant with the sometimes painful downward ratcheting of expectations we are collectively undergoing. The social critic Barbara Ehrenreich heralded the rethinking of mindless optimism in her 2009 best-seller, *Bright-sided: How Positive Thinking Is Undermining America*. In recent years, American optimism reached a manic crescendo. Ehrenreich has long trained an eye on the underside of America's smiling surfaces. She blames the tyranny of positive thinking and the nation's reckless optimism for both the war in Iraq and the economy's crash. 80
- 11 Optimism has its uses, to be sure. But the goal to "think positive" no matter the situation is insupportable and counterproductive. A wiser aim is to find the most effective way to propel us where we want to go. Both optimism and pessimism can help us get there – smiley face not required. 90

Adapted from 'The Uses and Abuses of Optimism and Pessimism' by Annie Paul

¹ Eeyore: a character in the Winnie-the-Pooh books - a pessimistic, gloomy, depressed, old grey stuffed donkey.