



Half Empty, Half Full: Understanding the Psychological Roots of Optimism

By Dr. Susan C. Vaughan



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Why do some people lead positive, hope-filled lives, while others wallow in pessimism? In her groundbreaking book, *Half Empty, Half Full*, leading psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and researcher Susan C. Vaughan reveals the specific character traits that produce highly hopeful individuals and offers fresh and helpful advice on how to become a more optimistic person. Examining the origins of optimism in early childhood and presenting new evidence for the role of biology in how we interpret our experiences, Vaughan shows how optimism is a process, not a state, that is within the grasp of everyone. Informative and uplifting, *Half Empty, Half Full* offers some unusual but proven tricks and techniques to fool the brain's circuitry into looking on the bright side of life.



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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Crack open Susan Vaughan's *Half Empty, Half Full*, check out the fat margins and the relatively large type size, and you might think one of two things: You'll either say, "Great! This'll be a quick read!" or you'll say to yourself, "What is this, a self-help book? *This* can't be science."

Either way, optimist or pessimist, you're going to be at least half-right. But--as Vaughan ultimately makes clear--it's the optimist who's going to win out on this one. A Harvard-trained research analyst and frequent contributor to *Harper's Bazaar*, the inarguably insightful Vaughan ably straddles the fence between self-help and applied psychology. Her thesis boils down to this: Some of us are lucky enough to be trained as optimists in our formative years; for the rest of us worry-warts, fear not--optimism can be learned. Alternating between dry papers, like "Mood congruent memory biases in anxiety and depression," and pop-psych concepts, like Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's early 1990s notion of "flow," Vaughan comforts the afflicted with thoughtful explanations (often drawing from her experience as a therapist) and concrete advice--assuming, of course, you can get past her sometimes cloying references to "Tiggers" and "Eeyores."

Half Empty, Half Full is good news for pessimists, and even good science, a timely summary of the state of neuroscience, as it bolsters many theories of what Vaughan describes as the "positive psychology movement." The antidepressant Paxil, early cortico-limbic development, desperation in milk-treading lab rats, even Cocoa Crispies ("which are apparently like ambrosia to rats")--they're all here and, thanks to Vaughan, good reading and a compelling argument for not simply chalking up pessimism to factors beyond our control. --Paul Hughes

From Publishers Weekly

In this account of the development and treatment of pessimism, Vaughan (*The Talking Cure*; *Viagra*) contends that a pessimistic personality results from an individual's earliest experiences of frustration. These lead to the formation of cortical loops in the brain that encode the physiological basis for the expectation of disappointment and an overall negative outlook. Although temperamental traits are often viewed as intractable, Vaughan argues that psychotherapy aimed at promoting a sense of self-control over negative emotional states "can gradually chip away at long ingrained cortical patterns and gradually replace pessimism with optimism." But what is pessimism? Is it a truly unique form of psychopathology? By linking pessimism to original parent-child interactions, Vaughan implicitly ties it to "basic mistrust" or an "insecure attachment." However, Vaughan does not explain how "pessimism" differs from the depression and anger that have traditionally been associated with early experiences of frustration. This lack of rigor is accentuated by prose in which such stock phrases as "the ties that bind" or "pushing the envelope" stand for concrete descriptions of the problem of affective disorder and its treatment. Written for a general audience, this book lacks the conceptual clarity necessary for understanding psychological despair.

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From Library Journal

According to Vaughan (psychiatry, Columbia; *The Talking Cure*), optimism is not an innate personality trait--one's ability to modify emotions and moods determines it. Early childhood experiences shape neural circuits in the brain, forming the basis for mood modulation in later life. Reviewing current research in psychology and neurology, Vaughan demonstrates that it is possible to change the impact of these early experiences, reshape brain circuitry, and develop an "illusion of control" over negative feelings and internal

states. As an example of such self-mastery, Vaughan cites the late Jean- Dominique Bauby (The Diving Bell and the Butterfly), who suffered a severe stroke that paralyzed his body but left his mind undamaged. Although Bauby could only communicate by blinking his left eye, he refused to succumb to self-pity and depression and remained optimistic. Vaughan writes in a clear, though repetitive, style. Recommended for popular psychology collections.

-Lucille M. Boone, San Jose P.L., CA

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Users Review

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