

The Cynicism Handicap



When he came home, he didn't look great. Pale. In pain. Propped up in a hospital chair. Crutches sat beside him. If he was harbouring any negative thoughts, he didn't let on. Being in his 80's and just having had a knee replacement, he had every right to be somewhat down. How hard was this recovery going to be? There wasn't a peep. A week later the beanie was on his head as the wind whistled past. He was slowly inching up and down his street on the crutches. As always, quietly taking it in his stride.

In contrast, we all know one. Plenty to say. If things aren't going right, you'll hear about it. Never short of an opinion. That opinion usually tilted toward the negative on people, events, and the general state of the world. Some might term them a pessimist; others might term them a cynic.

While a pessimist focuses on the doom, expects the worst, and generally expects to see poor outcomes in everything, the cynic is more focused on the negatives of human nature. Being that everyone is self-interested, and we should expect the worst in all people. While not quite interchangeable, you might say they overlap in some ways and that cynicism is a rest stop on the road to pessimism.

How we view these people is fascinating. Over the years the cynic has somewhat been romanticised as those who are realistic and clear-headed, instead of being seen as dark and pessimistic. This was true with Ancient Greek cynics such as Diogenes, to more modern writers such as Ambrose Bierce and George Bernard Shaw who praised cynicism, and more recently, characters in popular culture such as House MD, Sherlock Holmes and Han Solo who are seen as intelligent, knowledgeable, and experienced.

In a year when everything seems to be going wrong, from war to inflation, constant flood and fire, or just your luggage not ending up at your destination after a flight, thinking the worst about everybody and everything isn't the hardest thing to do. Buying into someone else's damnations maybe even easier, especially if you're already in the mood to hear it.

But there are some reasons, we should pause before going down this path.

The first one is health. In various studies cynics have been shown to have [poor health](#) outcomes, ranging from mental health to increased mortality risks. Is it chicken or egg? Does cynicism cause poor health outcomes or do poor health outcomes result in people becoming cynical, or do they both feed into each other to form a vicious cycle? Potentially, all of the above.

Being cynical can potentially lead to a delayed recovery or further medical struggles. As noted by a [clinical psychologist](#) "The degree of which people develop and use coping strategies to deal with an illness can have an impact. Cynicism is linked to feelings of pointlessness and the attitude that something is not going to work. It is very different to if someone is accepting of a diagnosis and takes a stance of how best to respond to their condition."

The second one is happiness and how you feel about the future. In a very [simple study](#) people were asked how they saw life. The answers could be a combination of long or short and easy or hard. Few people chose the long and easy option, but those who did were the happiest and had the lowest expectation they would encounter negative events. The larger number who chose the short and hard option had the lowest levels of happiness and a higher expectation they would encounter negative events.

There wasn't any major difference in the prior positive or negative events in the lives of these two groups. Meaning there was no discernible influence from their past that was influencing or predicting their positive or negative outlook, but that outlook did predict how they felt about the future.

The final one is cynics and their competence. Cynics aren't exactly as competent and knowledgeable as you may assume. As noted earlier, the cynic or pessimist has been seen as the one with their finger on the pulse. These people aren't shy about offering an assessment on the current state of affairs, leading to the assumption they're well informed and quite competent. To come up with a gloomy scenario a person must do some thinking and have some reasoning behind their thinking, which may offer the impression they're more intelligent than the rest of us.

Not the case. [A study](#) by Olga Stavrova and Daniel Ehlebracht from 2018 called "The Cynical Genius Illusion: Exploring and Debunking Lay Beliefs About Cynicism and Competence" delved into this. First, they confirmed the idea that many people see cynics as more competent and intelligence, then tested that competence in a series of cognitive and academic tasks.

There was no link between cynicism and intelligence, or cognitive ability, and the cynics actually did worse in testing. The study spanned cultures and countries, finding while there were competent and intelligent cynics, the most competent people adjusted their cynicism depending on the society they lived in. If cynicism was warranted by living in a corrupt state, then competent people were cynical, if it wasn't warranted, then the most competent people weren't cynical. If you live in a malevolent environment being cynical is a rational response, being cynical in a free and democratic environment only means less trust and opportunity for the cynic.

This was reflected in financial findings. Cynics miss out on opportunities and make less money as a result. If you close yourself off and don't trust anyone, thinking everything will end poorly, it's no surprise you might make less money. Arguably, cynical people are cynical because they don't know who to trust and it becomes a protection strategy.

From an investment standpoint it may seem rational. The argument being one must be cynical to protect themselves because there are so many scams and potential pitfalls for investors out there. Protecting yourself doesn't require any cynicism. Cynics close themselves off and stop learning. Someone can protect themselves by opening their mind, remaining informed and understanding what's possible and probable. And if you don't understand something, don't let yourself be rushed.

Finally, you might be wondering about our friend with the new knee. He's now off his crutches and walking without assistance. The knee is healing well and last weekend he even mowed the lawn. That might be a negative or positive, depending on how you look at it.

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