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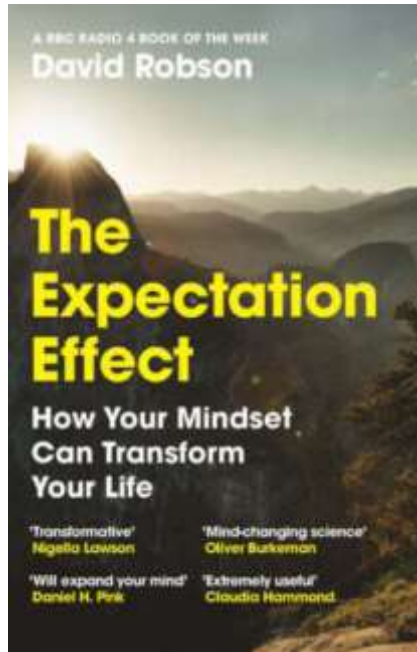
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THE EXPECTATION EFFECT: HOW YOUR MINDSET CAN TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE, DAVID ROBSON

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Sevket AKYILDIZ*



* SOAS London, sevket.akyildiz1@gmail.com <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9545-4432>

The notion that the mind influences the body has ancient philosophical roots; however, modern scientific research finds that the ancients might have been correct. David Robson's *The Expectation Effect: How Your Mindset Can Transform Your Life* brings together the latest research about our positive and negative expectations and how they can impact us physically, mentally, and socially. The former-BBC science journalist and editor Robson declares, '*... in this book I want to show you how those beliefs, in themselves, are shaping your health and well-being in profound ways, and that learning to reset our expectations about these issues can have truly remarkable effects on our health, happiness, and productivity*' (p. 1).

The book's notes consist of 58 pages of references (journal articles, books, and online sources) and ten chapters. Starting with an analysis of how our beliefs shape our reality in chapter one ('The Prediction Machine'), with its focus on a new theory: '*According to an increasing number of neuroscientists, the brain is a "prediction machine" that constructs an elaborate simulation of the world, based as much on its expectations and previous experiences as the raw data hitting the senses. For most people, most of the time, these simulations coincide with objective reality, but they can sometimes stray far from what is actually in the physical world*' (p. 10).

Chapter two ('A Pious Fraud') explores how beliefs can transform recovery from illness, the mind-body "connection" and how our thoughts positively or negatively affect our biological functions. In particular, the positive role of the placebo ('I shall please') in maintaining a healthier body (p. 36). Also discussed is how the brain manages the body's resources '*based on its previous memories and associations*' (p. 37), for instance, its release of dopamine and opioids (p. 55). Further topics include (psychosomatic) illness combated by enhanced expectations and positive beliefs. It includes '*reconfiguring the prediction machine's expected outcomes using rational analysis to resolve unfounded doubts*' (p. 45).

The dark side of the 'prediction machine' and how negative expectations of illness – and associated stress hormones and chronic inflammation – affect our physiology and health are investigated in chapter three ('Do No Harm'). Robson

says, *‘Our new understanding of the brain as a prediction machine provides us with innovative strategies to mitigate those effects and neutralise our self-made curses’* (p. 52); the strategy is referred to as ‘reframing’ (p. 63).

Chapter four (‘The Origins of Hysteria’) shows how negative expectations spread within groups and how social contagion affects mental health. This leads to modern health scares in developed countries affecting millions of people (in the form of psychogenic illnesses) (p. 71). The specific contagion process (labelled the ‘mirror system’) is a component of the prediction machine, *‘which allows us to build others’ physical and mental states into our simulations of the world’* (p. 71). One example is the statin intolerance debate. Robson also examines the stigma *‘attached to psychogenic and psychosomatic illnesses’*; these illnesses have psychological, social and cultural origins that need acknowledgement (p. 89).

Chapter five (‘Faster, Stronger, Fitter’) analyses the mind and sport, exercise and health. Emphasis is placed on one’s mindset to improve physical performance. Other topics explore the use of imagination, visualisation and mental crutches, and rituals used by elite and everyday sportspeople. Chapter six (‘The Food Paradox’) discusses – in the context of the mind and reframing – some practical ways to combat obesity and a ‘ravenous appetite’ (p. 117). Two notable food-related topics are: for evolutionary reasons, economically poor people will consume as much food as possible when the opportunity arises and burn the calories slowly (as controlled by the brain) in case of future food scarcity. It leads to obesity (p. 132). Secondly, Robson mentions that we live with cultural expectations about ‘different foodstuffs’ and how they might negatively impact our health (for example are dairy products good or bad for humans?); *‘Remember that people who believe they are more at risk of a heart attack are four times more likely to suffer from heart disease’* (p. 136).

Chapter seven (‘De-stressing Stress’) explains how to reframe negative expectations and feelings to one’s benefit. The author asks us to rethink our attitude towards anxiety, accept it and work with it. Another topic considers our perceptions of sleep and the amount required to complete daily work. Chapter eight (‘Limitless

Willpower') discusses enhancing self-control, resilience, and mental focus. The key points are that willpower can grow with practice (p. 162), and everyday 'superstition' and 'ritual' (acting somewhat like a placebo) can help with self-control and dampen anxiety (p. 176).

Chapter nine ('Untapped Genius') considers different ways of thinking that enhance intelligence, creativity and memory. In brief, Robson reviews how to bring out the best (or worst) in someone (p. 181) and how we 'absorb assumptions from people around us' for good or bad (p. 183). The political impact is shown in the debate about social equality and social marginalisation. Robson comments: '*There is abundant evidence that many people – who are not overly racist – hold implicit prejudices based on ethnicity and that biases can be communicated non-consciously, with important consequences for academia and the workplace*' (p. 195). Also highlighted is the 'stereotype threat' that hinders performance due to anxiety around '*conforming to negative expectations about their group*' (p. 195).

Chapter ten ('The Super-Agers') analyses self-perception and expectations about ageing, how we feel about our mind and body, how others make us feel about ageing, and how this affects our actual ageing process.

The book's strength is its collation and presentation of current research. The reader will refer to Robson's popular science text for future clarification and fact-checking. The chapters are diverse and cover topics that many will find relevant. The Epilogue is thoughtful and reminds the reader that being average in life is fine, the mind 'is a work in progress', and being kind to oneself.

Regarding criticism, the in-text research examples originate from a few countries, and the reader is left wondering what scientists and academics are discovering (or not) in other countries. Palestinian schoolgirls are briefly mentioned as an example of 'mass psychogenic illness' during political upheaval and warfare on page 79. Nevertheless, no further context is analysed as to why? Also, sections of the content are not new information as they have been published in quality media for

the past few years. Lastly, no mention is made of how authoritarian and totalitarian governments might use expectation research findings.

Despite this, what Robson has achieved is bringing the research about the mind, body and culture together and in the context of the ‘prediction machine’ (the mind), expectations, the placebo and the nocebo (‘I shall harm’) usage in scientific studies, and the notion of framing. The Expectation Effect is written clearly, making scientific research comprehensible. It suits the general reader, university students, and scholars of human culture, mind and body.

Source

David Robson. (2022). *The Expectation Effect: How Your Mindset Can Transform Your Life*. Edinburgh: Canongate.