What if Pigs Really Could Fly? Get Creative to Predict Future Events

by Louise Rasmussen - November 12, 2012

Thinking through incredible scenarios can be productive if you’re writing a fiction story. But, surely it won’t help you predict future events? Or, will it?

Research has shown that thinking about outcomes you believe to be unlikely, yet possible can help you anticipate things to come.

When we try to predict future events, like the final score in a sports game, the outcome of an election, or how our child will do on a spelling test we tend to spend most of our time thinking about a single outcome. And, the more we think about this outcome, the more likely we are to believe that this is what will happen.

This may be one of the reasons most of us come up short when it comes to psychic abilities. It’s why we need to temper our intuitions with a decent dose of critical thinking.

Edward Hirt and Keith Markman of the Indiana University at Bloomington looked at ways to help people make predictions that are less biased towards their favorite outcome. Their paper, "Multiple Explanation: A Consider-an-Alternative Strategy for Debiasing Judgments" was published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.

In a clever study, these researchers had students attempt to predict the outcome of a sports game. Before making their predictions the students were asked to use different thinking strategies by writing down explanations why certain outcomes might occur.

Some students were only asked to explain a single outcome (a convincing win by team A).

Others had to explain the single outcome plus an alternative. The alternative could either be a variation on the first outcome (team A wins, but it’s a close game), the opposite of the first outcome (team B wins by a small margin), or an implausible outcome (team B knocks it out of the park).

The students who only explained a single outcome were overly confident in that outcome.

Those who explained two possibilities were less biased towards any single outcome. This was true even if the alternative outcome they had explained was only a variation on the first (the less convincing win by team A).

But, if the alternative was one they did not think was remotely plausible, then the students became even more confident in the first outcome. The strategy backfired when the students had to stretch their thinking too far.
Hirt and Markman believe the mere activity of explaining an alternative outcome usually leads us to realize that the outcome isn’t as predictable as we first thought. This gives us a way to better anticipate possibilities that we would never have considered otherwise.

Thinking through alternative possibilities can help unravel unhealthy attachments we may have to particular outcomes. That helps us better anticipate the future, as well as to control our impulses.