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## BLOGPOST: Monthly motivation: How we deceive ourselves



For the past couple of months philosopher Jörg Bernardy has taken a closer look at contemporary and philosophical issues in our ' [Monthly Motivation](#) ' blog format. Due to high demand we will continue this series in 2021. The first post in the new year focuses on our tendency to deceive ourselves.

### Nothing bad will happen to me!

Although on average one in two men and two out of five women are affected by a cancer diagnosis, we tend to overestimate our personal cancer risk. Often we remain entirely blind to our most likely causes of death. We may fear dying in a shocking terrorist attack, at the hand of a wrong-way driver or in a pedestrian accident, but the data from the German Federal Statistical Office show us that most Germans die from heart disease, lack of exercise, poor nutrition or the effects of smoking and alcohol. And yet these are usually the very things we fear the least, because the noticeable consequences usually don't present themselves until far in the future.

### We lack solid risk competence

'It's frightening how blind our education system is when it comes to risk competence,' says psychologist and risk researcher Gerd Gigerenzer. We're not being taught how to think statistically or how to deal with our fears and desires in an emotionally intelligent way. Instead, we mostly just follow our tendency to fear high-impact risks above anything else. This is why we're more afraid of plane crashes and terrorist attacks than of motorbike and car accidents – which is absurd, as more people die in traffic every year than in all terrorist attacks and plane crashes combined.

### Unrealistic optimists

Unrealistic optimism is the term psychologists use for our tendency to assume that nothing bad will happen to us. Similar optimistic misconceptions are widespread when it comes to climate change and the assessment of our future as a whole. We know, for example, that Spain, some regions in Germany and major Turkish cities like Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir are already struggling with water shortages. All over the world, including in Europe, different sorts of extreme weather conditions are becoming more frequent. Nevertheless, many people continue to cling to their inner mantra that it won't affect them.

### Others will take care of it

The other side of 'nothing bad will happen to me' is the inner conviction that 'others will take care of it'. Whether it's a financial crisis such as in 2007/08, climate change or the corona crisis, we rely on others to take action. In psychology, this behaviour is known as the bystander effect. To use an example: the more people are present at an accident, the less likely the victim is to receive help quickly. Both these attitudes – 'nothing will happen to me' and 'others will take care of it' – are widespread forms of self-deception.

### Lack of empathy

As pleasant, pragmatic and unnoticeable as our 'nothing bad will happen to me' may be in everyday life, ultimately it often hides a

downright lack of empathy. Or rather, a refusal to empathise with the facts, with nature and with our own future. Psychoanalysts would even argue that we ultimately lack empathy for the most important resource in our lives: ourselves. Our self-deceptions go hand in hand with a consistent repression of the darker sides of human nature. Just as we're in denial about the probable dangers and risks in our future, we also deceive ourselves about our own dark impulses. But it is precisely these that we need to confront more closely and learn to understand better if we want to overcome future crises and problems.

'Above all, don't lie to yourself'

Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881), *The Brothers Karamazov*

This article was originally posted in our blog:

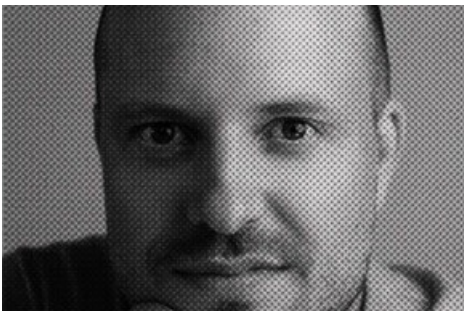
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#### Medieninhalte



*Monthly motivation: How we deceive ourselves*



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