

Hope for the Best or Plan for the Worst?

Patrick lost his job as a switchboard operator last year and has had a very difficult time finding a new job. There are very few jobs available for someone with his skill set, and meanwhile his bills are piling up. In particular, Patrick has significant medical debt because his daughter has a rare medical condition and he has no health insurance.

Patrick is feeling increasingly anxious about his situation, and his family is too. The last thing that Patrick wants to do is worry his family, however, so he does his best to put on a brave face and tell them that everything will be okay. He says that if he keeps trying, eventually something will work out, and they all need to have faith. Patrick finds that this message of hope helps his family to cope with their situation. Interestingly, he finds that it helps him to cope with this situation as well, at least to a degree. Deep down he knows that this message is overly optimistic: He realizes that no matter how hard he tries, he will probably not find a job anytime soon, and that even if he does, it will probably not pay enough to cover all his expenses. Still, Patrick finds that the more he tells everyone that everything will be okay, the more he believes it too. And the more he believes it too, the more motivated he feels to keep trying, and the more likely he is to succeed.

Nevertheless, at the end of the day Patrick is not able to fully deceive himself. In his moments of honest reflection, he still sees how bad the job market is and how dire his prospects are. This makes him feel torn. When he tells everyone that everything will be okay, this really does seem to benefit everyone (including, to a degree, himself). And maybe allowing everyone to enjoy this benefit for as long as possible is a morally permissible, if not morally required, part of caring for his family during hard times. Yet he when he tells everyone that everything will be okay, he is also actively deceiving them. And any resulting false sense of security could have bad effects too; for example it could make everybody (including, to a degree, Patrick) less prepared than they should be for the bad outcomes that are most likely to happen. All things considered, Patrick feels unsure whether he should keep on his brave face or not.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In cases where false beliefs would have good consequences, is it more important to have true beliefs or to promote good consequences?
2. Morally speaking, is there a difference between deceiving others and deceiving oneself?
3. Generally speaking, is it better to be optimistic or pessimistic in life? If so, which is it better to be and why? If not, why not?

