Radical Optimism

Audree Fletcher, SDinGov2024



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Deeana Arts on Pexels

When pessimism is this prevalent, optimism matters more than ever

Optimism has a brand problem

Netflix Series - The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt

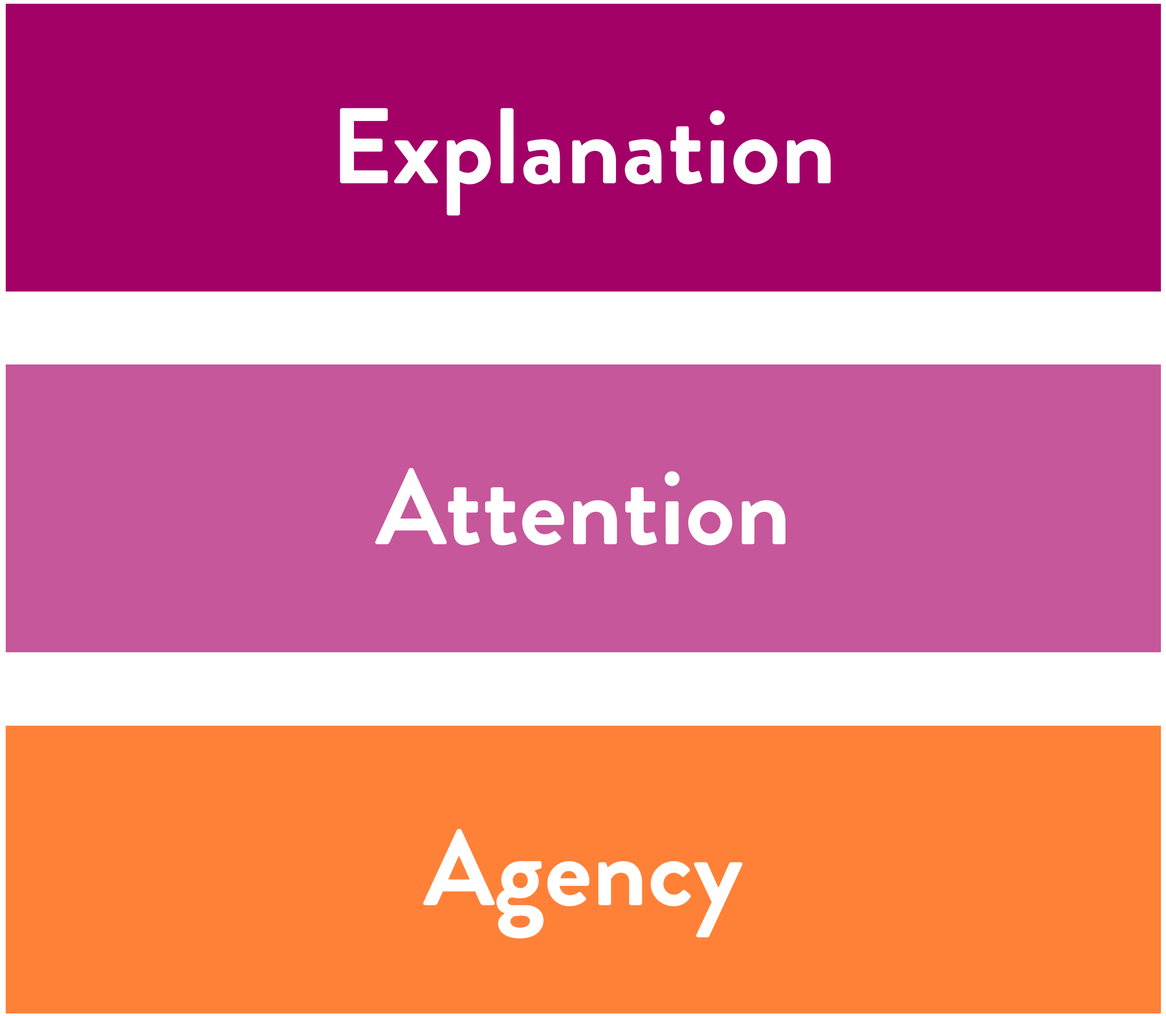


Dispositional optimism


Explanatory
optimists

Where optimism is seen as naive, ignorant or delusional, pessimism might make you look smart.

But it also keeps you stuck.



Martin Seligman's components of explanatory optimism

Explanation

“the blob”

incompetent

lazy

obstructive

incapable of change

the status quo is too powerful

leaders are too risk averse to try new things

culture eats strategy for breakfast

Few ideas have as much power to shape the world as our view of ourselves and our view of other people.

Ultimately we usually get what we expect.

How you explain what happened in the past, what is happening now, and what you think that means for the future - it all opens up or closes down what will be possible for you.

Hear and challenge your unhelpful internal narratives.

Believing an organisation's bureaucratic immunity response is too powerful for things to change
gives it that power.

Collect, curate and share realistically optimistic stories to get out of your own way.

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Choose how you frame failure

Acknowledge the reality of challenging situations.

Look for what good can be taken from it.


“I wouldn’t be learning anything if I got it right all the time”

Avoidable failure

Basic mistakes, blips and slips that are usually preventable and so should be prevented

Unavoidable failure

Complex, multicast failures that couldn't have been predicted or prevented

Intelligent failure

"Good failures" that deliver meaningful insights without big losses

- from "The Science of Failing Well" by Amy Edmondson

Show up optimistically.

Priming is powerful - for you and for others - so plan how you want to show up.

“Regardless of what we discover, we must understand and truly believe that everyone did the best job they could given what they knew at the time, their skills and abilities, the resources available, and the situation at hand”...*and the stories they told themselves*.

The Retrospective Prime Directive - by Norm Kerth - with my addition

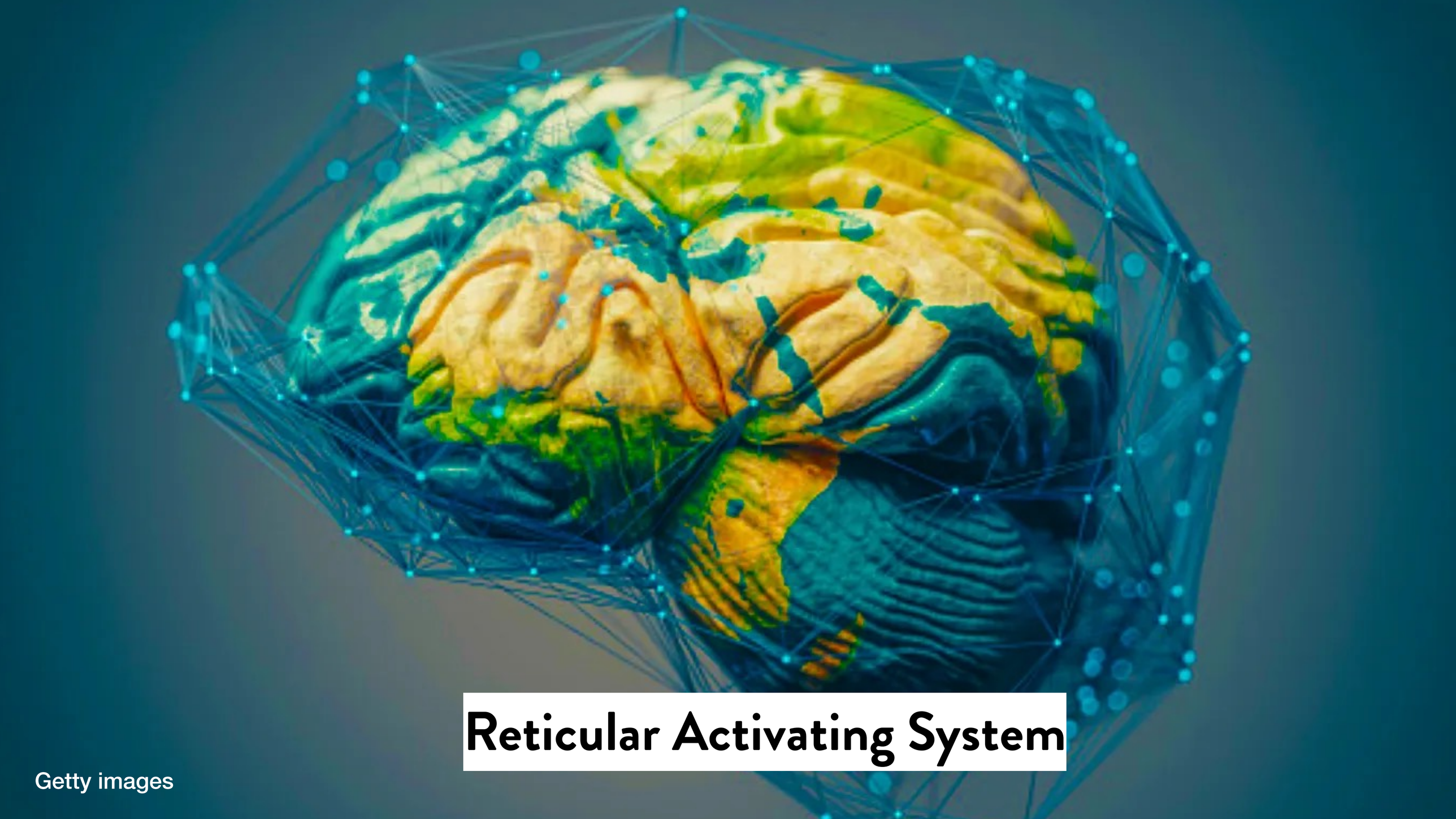
Attention

How many times do the players in white pass the ball?



On average, 50% of people seeing this for the first time don’t notice the gorilla





Reticular Activating System

Getty images

Draw attention to the reasons for optimism

Don’t assume people have spotted the small wins (the gorilla).

It’s hard to maintain a narrative of “nothing ever changes” when people keep pointing out change.

Where did you start and how far have you come?

What is going well?

What has changed - however small?

What strengths and assets do you have and can grow?

What alliances can you build and nurture?

What opportunities are there?

Where is there energy and momentum you can tap?

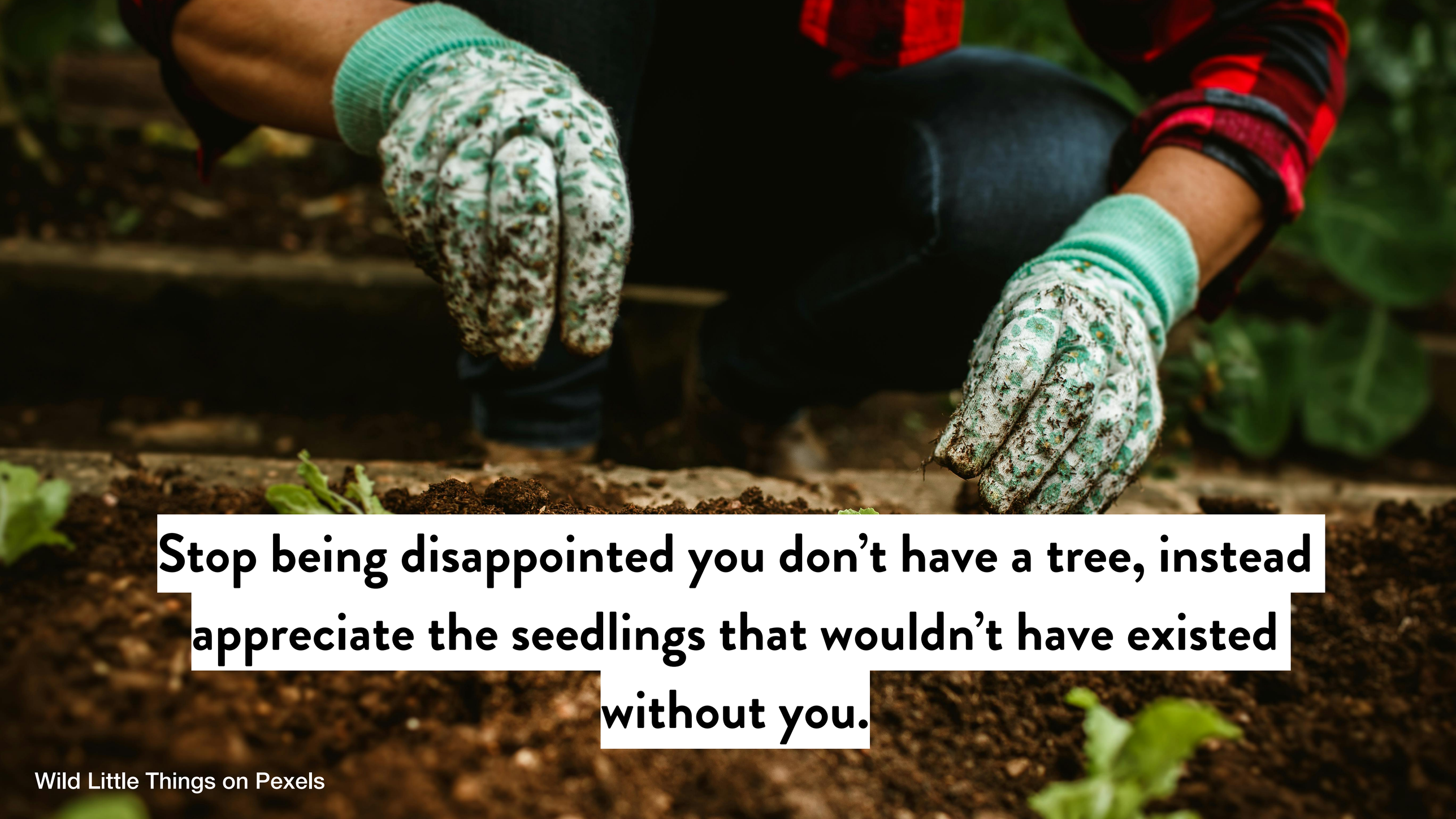
Shift your time horizons

"Change mostly happens step by step with maybe some backsliding, muddling and stalling, not via one great leap".

- Rebecca Solnit



Wild Little Things on Pexels



Wild Little Things on Pexels

Bring the real talk

Avoid problems like wishful thinking and toxic positivity by inviting in *and hearing* your pessimists, cynics and critics.

- Hopes and fears exercise

Forcefield analysis

Sabotage workshops

Pre-mortems

Fail-fests and cautionary tales

Agency

Take a banded mastery approach to growing agency

There is nothing like seeing yourself actually changing things for fuelling your self-belief.

“Do what you can, with what you’ve got, from where you are”

- Franklin D. Roosevelt

Just get started

The best think you can
do if you're feeling stuck
is get started.

Little is as precious,
when it comes to change,
as the optimism that
comes from momentum.

Feeling overwhelmed? What is the smallest meaningful experiment you can run or change you can make?



from Lucie Kaas

Play with distance and constraints to open up the possibility space

When people suspend judgment, even if just a little, they start to think much more creatively.

- Sabotage workshops

Futurecasting to 2030

Change cards

Hard and soft constraints

Conclusion

Explanation

1. Hear and challenge your unhelpful internal narratives

2. Choose how you frame failure

3. Show up optimistically

Attention

1. Draw attention to the reasons for optimism

2. Shift your time horizons

3. Bring the real talk - invite the cynics in

Agency

1. Take a banded mastery approach to growing agency

2. Just get started

3. Play with distance and constraints to open minds

Design is an inherently optimistic practice


2p
2p



Boom on Pexels

Links, references, tools and more for you to explore at your own pace

P.S. - a final thought

At SDinGov 2024 I have this talk about optimism and how essential it is to believe we can make change happen (in this case, design better public services) if we want to do so.

I spoke of a realistic optimism - I cautioned against wishful thinking, gaslighting and toxic positivity, and pointed to the need to draw in critical voices, acknowledge the problems and challenges you face, so that you may plan your route to a brighter future with your eyes wide open.

I want to emphasise today, though, that you still must put yourself and your wellbeing ahead of the work. Your feelings are valid. If your context is such that you find yourself unable to summon the belief that you can change things - or if you believe you would have to sacrifice too much of yourself (and your health) to do so - then please do what you need to do.

Honour yourself. You don’t owe anyone anything.