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THE HYPOMANIC
THE LINK BETWEEN
(A Little) CRAZINESS
AND
(A Lot of) SUCCESS
IN AMERICA
— JOHN D. GARTNER —
EDGE



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This wide-open land with seemingly infinite horizons has been a giant Rorschach on which they could project their oversized fantasies of success, an irresistible attraction for restless, ambitious people who have felt hemmed in by native lands with comparatively fewer opportunities. This appetite for risk — so great one might say it was imprinted in American genes — has not diminished with time but remains a continuing source of the nation's vitality. And we are still the most voluntarily mobile people on Earth. I think America has drawn hypomanics like a magnet. He found us to be "restless in the midst of abundance," and the proof was that we were always moving. It's in our blood. John D. Because this optimism comes from within, it is not easily discouraged by external events. The average American recalls only the barest outline of who the Puritans were, if at all. He sensed that the American motivation to make money was more about the excitement of making money than it was about wealth itself. One outlet for this restless energy has been business. The Hypomaniac Edge The Link Between (A Little) Crazy and (A Lot of) Success by John Gartner, Ph.D. Energy, drive, cockeyed optimism, entrepreneurial zeal, Yankee ingenuity, messianism, and arrogance are traits that have long been attributed to the "American character." But what is the source of this American temperament? Pessimists didn't bother," wrote Yale historian George Pierson. Or is it something deeper? Do men and women who risk everything to leap into a new world differ temperamentally from those who stay home? While we have no cross-cultural studies of hypomania, we can infer that we would find increased levels of hypomania among immigrant-rich nations like America, since mania and hypomania run together in the same families. We've changed little in that regard since Tocqueville's day. In fact, the top three countries with the most manics — America, New Zealand, and Canada — are all nations of immigrants. His confidence can make him charismatic and persuasive. 16 Characteristics of a Hypomaniac Entrepreneur These traits are viewed as faults by most but to a select few whose accomplishments have redefined the world, they are descriptions of a core psyche that is the foundation for innovation, creativity, and success. "The desire for prosperity has become an ardent passion which they pursue for the emotions it excites as much as for the gain it procures." And these people never stopped working. I would attribute the number of hours Americans work to what I call the "immigrant work drive," an internal biological compulsion passed from parent to child through their hypomaniac genes. They may be our greatest natural resource. When you talk to these strivers, they tell you that their drive comes from within and that they have been strongly "self-motivated" since they could remember. An untold number of hypomanics helped make America the richest and most successful nation on Earth. As expected, the percentage of immigrants in a population correlates with the percentage of manics in their gene pool. It would be surprising if they didn't. He feels brilliant, special, chosen: perhaps even destined to change the world. He is a risk taker. In America, "work opens a way to everything; this has changed the point of honor quite around." To Americans it was a disgrace not to work. "Everybody works," wrote Tocqueville. He is filled with energy. They hit the ground running and couldn't tell you why. They are not "well adjusted" by ordinary standards but instead forced the world to adjust to them. He acts out sexually. And optimism, like pessimism, often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. He is flooded with ideas. "Immigrants are unusual people," wrote James Jasper in Restless Nation. He becomes easily irritated by minor obstacles. Americans believed so deeply in the "virtue" of "commercial temerity" that they had all but removed the stigma surrounding financial failure. In Tocqueville's time, a European who went bankrupt might end up in debtor's prison, and he was more than a little surprised that there was little shame in bankruptcy here. If you are an impulsive, optimistic, high-energy risk taker you are more likely to undertake a project that requires a lot of energy and entails a lot of risk, and which might seem daunting if you thought about it too long or too realistically. America has been a ship riding the waves of irrational exuberance for hundreds of years, and it's not likely to change course any time soon. America has been good to hypomanics — a land of opportunity that has liberated their energies and lifted their spirits. Anyone who slows them down with questions "just doesn't get it." A HYPOMANIC NATION? Their stories are inspiring, comical, and sometimes tragic, as the hubris that fueled their improbable rise often led to their fall as well. In return, hypomaniac Americans have been good to America, powering a wilderness colony ahead of every other nation on the planet in just a few hundred years. Hypomanics are brimming with infectious energy, irrational confidence, and really big ideas. Hold on to your seat. boastful, hyperenergized, and zany, but not crazy." And the journalists were right. Only one out of a hundred people emigrate, and they tend to be imbued "with special drive, ambition and talent." A small empirical literature suggests that there are elevated rates of manic-depressive disorder among immigrants, regardless of what country they are moving from or to. He overspends in both his business and personal life. He often works on little sleep. We tend to attribute this habit to cultural influences, without even considering biological causes. Source: Alexis de Tocqueville, a Frenchman who traveled throughout America in the 1830s, was among the first to define the American character. The aristocratic European ideal was to become wealthy enough that one did not need to labor. That so many people would surrender the comfort and safety of their homes in pursuit of an "ideal" struck him as odd. He sometimes acts impulsively, with poor judgment, in ways that can have painful consequences. Tocqueville "found an entire people racing full speed ahead, and we've kept on racing for more than three hundred years," wrote Michael Ledeen in Tocqueville on American Character. According to Jasper, the average American changes residences every five years — more often than the inhabitants of any other nation. The stereotypic American success story is of an entrepreneur who fails numerous times before achieving his big success. Their subjects were not manic. Are we a nation fueled by predominating genetic characteristics predisposed to entrepreneurialism, risky innovative ventures, and a willingness to fail in the pursuit of an ideal? Energy, drive, cockeyed optimism, entrepreneurial and religious zeal, Yankee ingenuity, messianism, and arrogance are traits that have long been attributed to an "American character." But given how closely they overlap with the hypomaniac profile, these traits might be better understood as expressions of an American temperament, shaped in large part by our rich concentration of hypomaniac genes. He can be euphoric. He is driven, restless, and unable to keep still. "You had to be an optimist to move. If a scientist wanted to design a giant petri dish with all the right nutrients to make hypomaniac genius flourish, he would be hard pressed to imagine a better natural experiment than America. Because of America's origins, it has an abundance of people with a hypomaniac temperament. Europe is in the middle, in both its rate of immigrant absorption and its rate of mania. He is fast-talking. These hypomanics were outrageous — arrogant, provocative, unconventional, and unpredictable. They think, talk, move, and make decisions quickly. They were hypomaniac. America's workaholicism is typically attributed to its Puritanical "Protestant work ethic." But is it reasonable to ascribe such enormous influence on the contemporary day-to-day behavior of hundreds of millions of diverse Americans to a defunct 17th century English Protestant sect? Our immigrant genes predispose us to optimism. And it has made good use of them by giving them freer rein, more opportunity, and greater respect than they have received elsewhere. He is prepared to take enormous risks to attain his ends. To emigrate to America was itself a great risk. Is it our economic system, vast resources, teachings of our forefathers, and national pride? Yet without their irrational confidence, ambitious vision, and unstoppable zeal, these outrageous men and women would never have sailed into unknown waters, never discovered new worlds, never changed the course of our history. America, a nation of immigrants, has higher rates of mania than every other country studied (with the possible exception of New Zealand, which topped the United States in one study). This is the characteristic that most distinguishes the American people from all others," wrote Tocqueville in Democracy in America. Asian countries such as Taiwan and South Korea, which have absorbed very few immigrants, have the lowest rates of manic depression. Tocqueville noticed that Americans were entrepreneurial risk takers: "Boldness of enterprise is the foremost cause of its rapid progress, its strength, and its greatness." Though some individuals failed, the collective efforts of entrepreneurs drove the nation forward. He is witty and gregarious. He channels his energy into the achievement of wildly grand ambitions. . Tocqueville was astonished to meet people moving from east to west and west to east. THE HYPOMANIC ENTREPRENEUR Entrepreneurs and the markets they energize have been commonly described in the media as "manic." Hypomanics are ideally suited by temperament to become immigrants. As British economic historian Edward Chancellor noted in his history of financial speculation Devil Take the Hindmost, the result is a society of people both culturally and genetically predisposed to economic risk: The American is equipped with more than just a hopeful vision of the future and a drive for self-improvement. He is a graduate of Princeton University, and widely published in scholarly journals and books. Americans work more hours than any other people on Earth. And we change jobs more frequently too. Hypomania is a mild non-pathological form of mania, often found in the relatives of manic-depressives. "Americans are constantly driven to engage in commerce and industry. Gartner, Ph.D., is a clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University Medical School. The next gold rush, the next boom, the next market mania is coming. A "nation of immigrants" represents a highly skewed and unusual "self-selected" population.

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