



COURSE 5

# URGENT OPTIMISM



INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE

**FUTURES THINKING**

taught by Institute for the Future with **Jane McGonigal**



## COURSE 5

# URGENT OPTIMISM

The goal of futures thinking is not to “accurately” predict the future. After all—if the future you think will probably happen isn’t a future you want, then what good is it to be right? Instead, the goal of futures thinking is to get better at actively shaping and influencing the future. When you get better at thinking about the future, you get better at changing the future. This course will help you take all of the foresight skills you’ve developed so far and apply them to making real positive change in your life, in your work, and in the world around you.

You’ll learn how to create and share “preferred futures”, which are highly persuasive, compelling visions of the changes you want to make real. You’ll use your preferred future to identify obstacles, recruit allies, collect resources, and plan action to make your vision real.

You’ll also practice making “artifacts” from the future, which are creative representations of how everyday life might be different in the future. Artifacts can inspire others to join you in your quest to make a preferred future real. In this course, leading futurists from the [Institute from the Future](#) will share with you their favorite future artifacts—and walk you through the entire creative process it took to make them.

Every action we take today changes the future. This course will help you identify and take the actions that make the biggest impacts on the most urgent challenges you and society face.



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## URGENT OPTIMISM

This deck is your summary, or “**CHEAT SHEET**”, for everything you’ll learn in this course.

Here's how to use it:

1. **Skim this deck now** to get a preview of what you’ll be learning and practicing in “Urgent Optimism: How to Turn Foresight into Action.”
2. **Review it again at the end of the course** to “lock in” your learnings.
3. **Come back any time** to refresh your memory, and to share what you’ve learned with others!

# What are the key URGENT OPTIMISM skills?

- Define a **preferred future**
- “**Backcast**” from a preferred future
- **Headline** the future
- Identify and analyze **images of the future**
- Increase optimism about any future (or, “**+1 the future**”)
- Create **artifacts from the future**
- Build an **action roadmap**
- Collect **pledges to make the future**

Each of these skills are summarized on the following pages:



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# Define a preferred future

A **preferred future** is a description of the world you want to wake up in, someday.

It defines a clear goal and vision for the future, one you can use to measure your success in making a difference.

It doesn't have to be the most probable future. It just has to be possible.

Start with the future you want the most – and then take actions, every day, to make it more and more likely.



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# “Backcast” from your preferred future

When you've defined your preferred future, you can create a “**backcast**” from it – **the opposite of a “forecast”**. A backcast helps you identify all of the actions you can take between today and your preferred future to make it more likely.

## **Backcasting has 3 parts:**

1. Identify existing people, movements and efforts that are **working in the same direction** as your preferred future, so you can team up.
2. Identify existing people, movements and obstacles that are **working against** your preferred future, so you can overcome or convert them.
3. Imagine things that **don't exist yet today** – technologies, organizations, laws or policies, movements – that should exist, to make your future more likely.



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# Headline the future

A **headline** from the future is a news story that might exist in the future.

To share **good news from the future**, think of headlines that might exist someday IF your preferred future becomes a reality. What achievements will be celebrated? What amazing happenings will be front page news?

Once you have a headline, you can create a full news story. Write an article, make a video, create documentary photos, or invent social media posts that might bring your future news story to life.



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# Identify and analyze images of the future

An **image of the future** is any representation in popular media of what the future might be like. They can be found in books, movies, television shows, comics.

You can also find images of the future in non-entertainment contexts, like religious texts, company websites, and political speeches.

Images of the future often express the culture's main hopes and anxieties about the future.



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# Increase optimism about any future (or, “+1 the future”)

After you've shared a forecast, scenario, image or artifact with someone, ask them:

**On a scale of 1-10, how does this make you feel about the future?**

1 is very worried (“I don’t want to wake up in this future!”), and 10 is very excited (“I can’t wait for this future to happen!”).

Whatever number they answer, start a conversation about how to increase it by +1. What action could you take, or what work could you do, today, to increase your optimism about the future you've been looking at? What would make you at least +1 less anxious and more hopeful about this future?



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# Create artifacts from the future

**Artifacts from the future** are objects that represent what ordinary, everyday life might be like in the future. They might be signs, products, clothing, food, apps – anything you might see or use in daily life in the future.

Artifacts from the future are often designed and produced to be **placed in real, everyday spaces today**, so that people can encounter them and have a surprising and provocative feeling of the future.

They blur the line between today and tomorrow, and help people ask, “**Do I want to wake up in a world in which this thing really exists?**”



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# Build an action roadmap

**An action roadmap** is a document that identifies many different actions you can take in the next decade to make your preferred future more likely.

It's organized into **easy actions and difficult actions**, and **actions to take soon versus actions to take further into the future**.

Action roadmaps help you plan your strategies. They also help you recruit others to join you, by showing them a clear path from today to the future you want.



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# Collect pledges to make the future

A **pledge to make the future** is a commitment to take one small action, soon, to help make your preferred future more likely.

The pledge can be **witnessed, signed and shared** to help keep you accountable to really do what you've pledged.

**Collecting pledges** from a team or group is a great way to wrap up a futures thinking session event or project. It completes the Foresight-Insight-Action cycle.



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# What strengths are you developing by building your Urgent Optimism skills?

hope

strategy

practical skepticism

empathy

mental flexibility

foresight

creativity

**Urgent Optimism skills** are particularly useful for developing **strategy** and **hope**.

**Strategy** - You become a master at setting clear goals, determining a course of action, and connecting the dots from the present to your target, or preferred, future.

**Hope** – You're confident that the actions you take today can potentially make a big impact on how your own future and the futures of others turn out.

# WHEN should you use your Urgent Optimism skills?

In the **Foresight-Insight-Action** cycle, Urgent Optimism is **the final step**.

After you've forecasted and evaluated many different alternative futures, Urgent Optimism skills help you define and actively plan for the one future you want to make a reality.



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## And depending on your Future State of Mind...

**Urgent Optimism skills** are a good place to start if you've landed in **square #4 of the Future Four-Square Tool**:

*"The future is getting worse – but I can already think of ways I can directly help change it and make it better!"*

Urgent optimism skills can help you plan your strategies so you can start taking action to make a better future today. They can help you increase hope in others, and motivate them to join you in action.



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I'm  
**Superpowerful**

The future is getting worse, but you feel capable of helping change and reshape it?  
Use your **URGENT OPTIMISM SKILLS!**

The future is getting better, and you can help move things in the right direction, faster? Use your **GAMING SKILLS!**

The future is getting worse, and you don't think you have any power to influence it?  
Use your **SIMULATIONS SKILLS!**

The future is getting better, but you don't think you have any power to influence it?  
Use your **FORECASTING SKILLS!**

it's getting  
**Worse**

I have  
**no power**

it's getting  
**Better**



## About this Specialization

The Institute for the Future is declaring 2020 “The Year of the Future,” because we believe that foresight is a human right. Every human should have the chance to develop the creative skills needed to imagine how the future can be different, and to participate in deciding what the future will be. We believe futures thinking shouldn’t be something that only happens in Silicon Valley. With our specialization in Futures Thinking on Coursera, we are the first organization ever to offer massively open, free training in futures thinking. We aim to upskill the entire planet in future thinking and future making, by teaching one million online learners via the Coursera platform. This text is one of 100 free readings distributed as part of our “Year of the Future” training.

## Institute for the Future

Institute for the Future is the world’s leading futures thinking organization. For over 50 years, businesses, governments, and social impact organizations have depended upon IFTF global forecasts, custom research, and foresight training to navigate complex change and develop world-ready strategies. IFTF methodologies and toolsets yield coherent views of transformative possibilities across all sectors that together support a more sustainable future. Institute for the Future is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Palo Alto, California.

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