PSYCHOLOGY & HUMAN NATURE

The Hypomanic Edge

by John D. Gartner

One psychologist's bold claim: a mild mania called hypomania gave America its wild energy, its boldest founders, and its crashes.

BEST POINTS FROM THE BOOK

01 **Hypomania is mania with the volume turned down - a temperament, not a breakdown.**

Floods of energy and ideas, sky-high confidence, fast talk, little need for sleep. It feels intoxicating and productive, so it gets mistaken for pure talent - but it can tip into mania or crash into depression.

02 **Read founders the clinical checklist for hypomania and they recognize themselves.**

Gartner read ten internet CEOs the textbook traits - restless, driven, grandiose, risk-hungry, irritated by obstacles, certain they are destined to change the world. Every one of them said it described the typical entrepreneur.

03 **Gartner's big claim: America didn't just attract hypomanics - it bred for them.**

Leaving everything familiar to gamble on an unknown continent is itself a hypomanic act. Centuries of that self-selection, he argues, concentrated the genes and habits here - 'the boldest natural experiment ever conducted.'

04 **Columbus, his first case study, was a messianic entrepreneur.**

He pitched his voyage for fifteen years, believed he heard voices, and cast himself as the man who would reclaim the Holy Land. His math was wrong; his certainty never wavered - and the certainty moved history.

05 **The prophets ran on the same fuel as the founders.**

Winthrop, Williams, and Penn swung between despair and ecstatic revelation while building colonies as 'cities on a hill.' In Gartner's telling, religious zeal and business drive are one temperament in two costumes.

06 **Hamilton built America's economy at hypomanic speed - then the cycle collected its fee.**

Orphaned immigrant, author of most of The Federalist, architect of the financial system. Then scandal, depression, and a fatal duel: Gartner reads him as cycling between hypomanic brilliance and despair.

07 **Carnegie believed he was personally destined to speed up evolution itself.**

The steel king who remade industry also funded thousands of libraries and crusaded to end war forever. When World War I mocked that mission, the grandiosity collapsed into grief.

08 **Hollywood was built by hypomanic immigrant families - and bipolar illness helped unbuild their empires.**

Lewis Selznick, Louis B. Mayer, and prodigy David O. Selznick turned manic energy and showmanship into an industry. The same inheritance ran darker in the family line, and the dynasties fell with it.

09 **Craig Venter is the living exhibit: the genome race ran on one man's arrogance.**

Impatient with the public project's pace, Venter launched Celera and forced a sprint to decode the human genome. Colleagues despised him - and concede his rivalry made everyone faster.

10 **The edge is double-sided: the same temperament inflates bubbles and builds the future.**

The dot-com frenzy that inspired this book was, Gartner says, both a brilliant breakthrough and a mass error in judgment. Hypomanic optimism overshoots; the crash is the downswing of a national mood cycle.

11 **Gartner ends with a warning: America could lose the edge on purpose.**

Close the door to immigrants - his 'Ellis Island blues' - or let genetic screening weed out bipolar-linked traits, and you drain the temperament he credits for American genius. The hypomanic, he suggests, is an endangered species.

THE BOOK, IN SHORT

Why is America so rich, restless, and boom-prone? John Gartner, a clinical psychologist at Johns Hopkins, argues the answer is partly genetic. Hypomania - a mild, inherited form of mania - endows people with surging energy, creativity, enthusiasm, and a propensity for risk. It is a temperament rather than an illness: it feels, in his words, 'highly intoxicating, powerful, productive and desirable,' though it can tip over into mania or sink into depression. Watching the internet bubble, Gartner read ten tech CEOs the clinical trait list for hypomania; every one recognized the profile of the entrepreneur.

His boldest claim is about immigration. To leave home and gamble everything on an unknown continent is itself a hypomanic-style act, so generation after generation America drew the boldest and most restless people from other nations - 'the boldest natural experiment ever conducted.' The classic American traits - cockeyed optimism, messianism, entrepreneurial and religious zeal,

arrogance - are, in his framing, the hypomanic profile written at national scale. His evidence is psychobiography: clinical case histories of famous lives, not lab data.

The cases march through five centuries. Columbus pitched his voyage for fifteen years, convinced he was a messiah who would reclaim the Holy Land. John Winthrop, Roger Williams, and William Penn - prophets who swung between despair and revelation - founded colonies as cities on a hill. Alexander Hamilton, an orphaned immigrant, envisioned America's economic future and built its financial system at furious speed, then self-destructed through pride and impulsive behavior, dying in a duel.

Later chapters reach Andrew Carnegie, certain he was destined personally to speed up human evolution and bring world peace, whose dream World War I shattered; the Selznick and Mayer families, who created Hollywood while bipolar illness ran through their houses and finally helped topple their empires; and Craig Venter, who raced to decode the human genome, spurring rivals onward even as his arrogance made him despised by colleagues.

Gartner calls the result a paradox: the hypomanic edge is a double-edged sword. It powers startups, inventions, and fortunes - and inflates the bubbles and messianic crusades that end in crashes. His conclusion looks forward: the temperament is ancient, but America could squander it, by turning away the immigrants who replenish it or by screening out the genes that carry it. The book is an argument, not a settled verdict - but it permanently changes how you read a founder's confidence, and a nation's mood.

DO THIS WEEK

For one week, track your own engine like a scientist: hours of sleep, morning energy, and how many shiny new ideas you chase each day. Gartner's telltale pattern is needing less sleep while certainty surges. If that combo shows up, treat it as a warning light: sleep first, write the grand plan down, and run it past one calm person before you bet anything on it.

By John D. Gartner, first published 2005 (Simon & Schuster). The New York Times Magazine named its thesis one of the notable new ideas of 2005; reviewers praised the storytelling while debating the method of diagnosing the dead - so read it as a provocative argument, not settled science. Read it if you build things, back founders, or wonder why American ambition runs so hot - and crashes so hard.