

Optimism vs. Pessimism

Does happiness actually lie in balancing the two extremes?

Research has shown that the way we feel emotions isn't just restricted to our brain—there are parts of our bodies that help and reinforce the feelings we're having. So what happens when we try to be optimistic all the time and intentionally suppress our negative feelings on an ongoing basis?

Optimism and pessimism may not actually be viewed as good or bad outlooks you're born with, but as mind-sets to adopt as situations demand.

It has been suggested that this suppressed negativity may “leak” into other realms of a person's life. In a series of studies from the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, subjects are asked to look at disgusting images while hiding their emotions or while holding pens in their mouths in such a way that prevented them from frowning. A third group could react as they pleased. The subjects in both groups that did not express their emotions reported feeling less disgusted afterward than control subjects. Then the subjects were given a series of cognitive tasks that included fill-in-the-blank exercises. It was found that subjects who had repressed their emotions performed poorly on memory tasks and completed the word tasks to produce more negative words—they completed “gr_ss” as “gross” rather than “grass,” for instance—as compared with controls. The study suggests that people who tend to do this regularly might start to see the world in a more negative light, as the emotion seeks other channels to express itself through when the face doesn't aid in expressing the emotion.

Therefore, as an article by [Psychology Today](#) put it, it's simply not the case that optimism is “good” and pessimism is “bad”—although that's how we've been encouraged to think about them. Rather, both are functional, and both have value. For example, both optimism and pessimism can act as powerful motivators. If you realistically considered how much risk you were taking on with a new project or acknowledged how much work it would demand, you might never make the attempt. But the energizing force of optimism can convince you it will work out just long enough to turn that prediction into a reality. Likewise, pessimism about a potential outcome can mobilize us to act with alacrity: there's nothing like a looming disaster to make us get things done.

“Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy.”

-Thich Naht Hanh

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Studies show that when it comes to smiling, you can fake it till you make it. Scientists have documented the physical release that happens when smiling and found that it releases dopamine and serotonin in the brain, sparking a feeling of happiness. Therefore, by deliberately changing our facial expressions, we can improve our physiological and psychological states. For example, researchers at the University of Cardiff in Wales found that people whose ability to frown is compromised by cosmetic Botox injections are happier, on average, than people who have the physical ability to frown. The concept works the opposite way too. For example, according to a study published in May 2008 in the *Journal of Pain*, people who frown during an unpleasant procedure report feeling more pain than those who do not.

Why do we remember the negative things more profoundly?

Why is it that losing money, being abandoned by friends and receiving criticism has a greater impact than winning money, making friends or receiving praise? We tend to ruminate more about unpleasant events, and use stronger words to describe them than happy ones. There are physiological as well as psychological reasons for this. The underlying reason lies in that our emotions influence how we process memories. Negative emotions generally involve more thinking, and the information is processed more thoroughly than positive ones. The idea is to use our experience to guide future behavior.

Researchers say studies using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) have shown negative events stimulate activity in emotion-processing regions of the brain, such as the orbitofrontal cortex and the amygdala. The more these emotional centers are activated

by an event, the more likely an individual is to remember specific details linked to the emotional aspect of the event, like the appearance of the gun, and perhaps less likely to remember more mundane details like a street address. Researchers say this technique of preserving bad memories may have evolved as an evolutionary tactic to protect against future life-threatening or negative events. Those who are more attuned to bad things would have been more likely to survive threats and, consequently, would have increased the probability of passing along their genes. Survival requires urgent attention to possible bad outcomes but less urgent with regard to good ones.

It is important to note that emotionally charged memories do not necessarily mean that events are remembered more accurately. In fact, there's a lot of evidence that all memories

can be distorted. It's a normal process — we're constantly taking our experience and revising it, even twisting it to our own benefit.

While all this may sound quite discouraging, there is an upside. Just knowing this may help us better deal with the bad stuff that will inevitably happen. Furthermore, keeping a “kudos” file to put all the praise you have received, along with e-mails or other notes from friends or family that make you feel particularly good can be effective. As Professor Baumeister noted in his study, “Many good events can overcome the psychological effects of a bad one.” In fact, the authors quote a ratio of five goods for every one bad. That's a good reminder that we all need to engage in more acts of kindness toward others and ourselves to balance out the world.

Provider Insight

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From a classic cognitive-behavioral perspective, I think we can work to change our thoughts, bringing rationality to our irrational cognitions or positivity to our negative self-talk. But problems can continue to arise when thoughts persist or repeat. This is where mindfulness based interventions have proven invaluable: in addition to thinking more optimistically, we can practice acceptance of the fact that pessimistic thoughts may be unavoidable. I'm especially partial to mindfulness meditation for this purpose. This is a way to practice being with whatever arises without it needing to be different. So if we are experiencing pessimism, meditation allows us to experience it fully and become more skillful in how we relate to it – perhaps using a visualization to distance ourselves from it, see it as simply a mental event (not as fact or truth), and watch it pass or dissipate.

Methods for positive thinking

Self Talk

- Using positive affirmations helps you learn to erase a negative thought and replace it with a positive one.

Avoid Negative People

- Attitude can often be contagious. If you can't avoid them, just accept that they may never change and don't let their pessimism rub off on you.

Create a Vision Board

- A vision board is the physical manifestation of the life you want to be leading. Find images of the house you desire, the places you want to travel, and the job you crave to work and tack them to a corkboard. Be creative and place words and images that are accurate expressions of your inner-most desires.

Meditate

- Meditation benefits positive thinking by allowing your mind to clear and think logically about your life without the distractions of life going on around you.

Dr. Clancy and the other four psychologists at The Center for Integrative Medicine teach mindfulness. If you are interested in trying it or learning more call us at 720-848-1090.