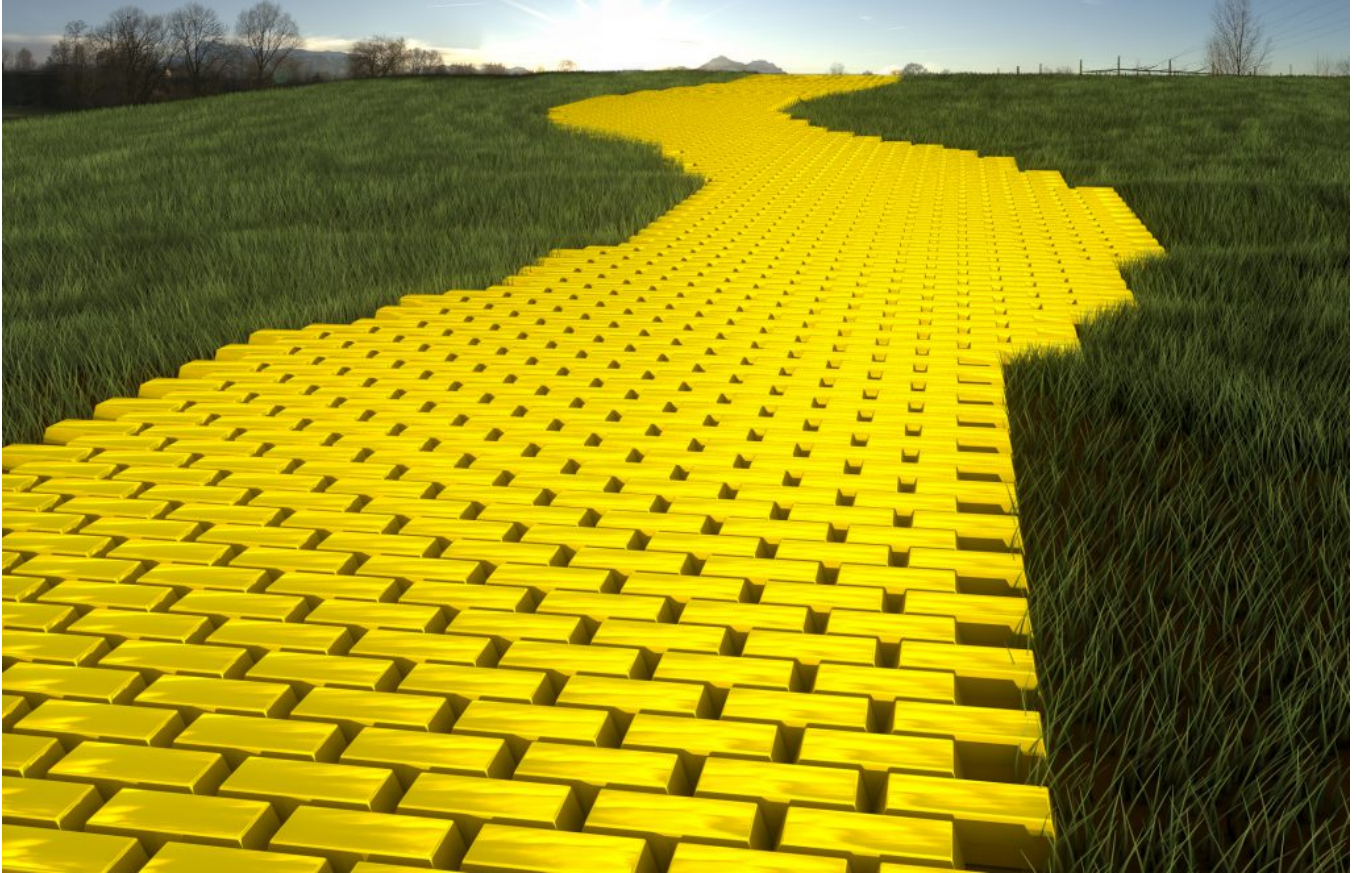


Our Futures Look Bright – Because We Reject the Possibility That Bad Things Will Happen

April 15, 2013



People believe they'll be happy in the future, even when they imagine the many bad things that could happen, because they discount the possibility that those bad things will actually occur, according to research published in [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

“I’ve always been fascinated by the changeability of people’s perceptions of happiness,” says psychological scientist Ed O’Brien of the University of Michigan. “On some days our futures seem bright and exciting, but on other days the same exact future event can feel stressful and terrifying.”

With this new research, O’Brien wanted to explore whether fluency — how easy or difficult it feels to think about different events — might play a role in how people think about well-being.

He conducted five studies, asking participants to complete online surveys with questions that addressed past and possible future experiences and perceptions of well-being.

In line with previous research, fluency amplified the effects of past events on participants’ reports of well-being: The easier it was for people to generate positive past experiences, the happier they said they

were in those times. Likewise, the easier it was to come up with negative past experiences, the more unhappy people said they were.

But, in an interesting twist, this trend did not hold true for future experiences.

While thinking about positive future events was still correlated with people's predictions of future happiness, thinking of negative future events didn't have the corresponding effect — easily imagining negative possibilities didn't sway people to believe that they would be unhappy in the future.

“People seem to ‘explain away’ the presence of bad possibilities, thinking that they won't really occur,” explains O'Brien. “But they have a harder time explaining the absence of good possibilities. The absence of good events in our future feels much worse than the presence of bad ones.”

That doesn't mean bad things can't happen to our friends, though. When participants were asked to imagine events and happiness for one of their close friends, they predicted that negative events would have a significant effect on their friend's well-being.

Having to recall many positive events was more difficult than having to come up with only a few, and participants' happiness ratings reflected this: People who were asked to recall twelve past events gave lower ratings of happiness for that period than people who were asked to recall only three experiences.

“Once you struggle to think about the good things, your life seems a lot less happy,” says O'Brien. “Ironically, trying to think of ten good things that could happen to you and struggling with that list may be worse for your wellbeing than thinking about only two good things without any problem.”

But, just as before, the trend didn't apply to negative events: There was no difference in predicted happiness whether participants were asked to think about three or twelve negative events.

These findings suggest that, when it comes to negative events in the future, fluency doesn't seem to matter — people expect that experiencing a few negative events is just as unlikely as experiencing many negative events, and they discount the likelihood that the experiences will occur at all.

O'Brien hopes to continue this research, looking for individual differences in the patterns, and also applying them to other domains such as consumer behavior: “Think about the counter-intuitive implications for increasing real buying behavior and customer satisfaction — maybe customers should be asked to consider all the bad things that could go wrong with the product they're about to buy, rather than the good.”

Ultimately, these findings have implications for how we think about what makes us happy.

“Anecdotally, many people endorse the belief that more happiness in quantity yields more happiness in quality. But these findings suggest that struggling to think about many happy aspects of your life can yield less happiness than easily imagining the negative aspects,” O'Brien concludes.

This research was supported by a Graduate Research Fellowship from the National Science Foundation.