

2022 Spence Award Mini Episode: Brett Ford on How People Manage Their Emotions

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The winners of the [2022 APS Janet Taylor Spence Award](#) represent some of the brightest and most innovative young psychological scientists in the world. In a series of mini-episodes, [Under the Cortex](#) talks with each winner about their research and goals.

Today we hear from Brett Ford (University of Toronto), who is examining the basic science and health implications of how individuals think about and manage their emotions.

Transcript:

Charles Blue ([00:12](#))

This is Charles Blue with the Association for Psychological Science with another in our series of many episodes of *Under the Cortex*. Today, I'm pleased to welcome back to the studio. Brett Ford with the University of Toronto and the winner of the APS 2022 Spence Award. Welcome back to the show.

Brett Ford ([00:30](#))

Thanks for having me.

Charles Blue ([00:32](#))

When last we spoke, you talked about the challenges of coping with COVID. We're going to take a look further back now and just really broadly talk about your current field of research. What are you now most interested in? What's the compelling thing that gets you up and doing work?

Brett Ford ([00:54](#))

That's a great question for us all these days, right? Pretty much all of my work is very much interested in how we feel and how these emotions that we feel and think about and try to manage in our daily lives end up both providing opportunities to protect our wellbeing, but maybe also can come at a cost to our wellbeing. And so I'm really interested in understanding how people can help protect themselves and their own wellbeing, but also most recently, really interested in understanding how our individual emotions and how we manage them and think about them can help us protect our communities as well. So that's where a lot of our work has kind of been coalescing recently.

Charles Blue ([01:41](#))

So if you were to look at this work and say, where have you made new understandings? What is it now? We know that we didn't know previously.

Brett Ford ([01:55](#))

A lot of what we have been learning about recently is trying to unpack some trade offs of some really common and what we thought were very well understood approaches to helping people feel better. So when people are really wanting to prioritize happiness, might there be some costs when people think that emotions are controllable? We used to think that could only be good, but it turns out that might actually predict some kind of unfortunate social costs. So we're a little bit harsher with people around us when we think they can control their emotions. And when we use these really common cognitive strategies to help ourselves kind of think about situations in a new way and manage our anxieties and our anger and our frustrations and our sadness, we sometimes miss out on some of the really important functions that those negative emotions provide us. And so I think it's important as a science kind of progresses, we get into the nitty gritty and we kind of get into, okay, when does this work? For whom does it work? And then sometimes we start to understand gosh some of these approaches that were very kind of commonly endorsed that there might actually be some important costs that we didn't quite know about because we weren't measuring them.

Brett Ford ([03:17](#))

And so me and my lab and my collaborators are really interested in understanding some of these trade offs to be able to be useful for the broader public.

Charles Blue ([03:26](#))

Taking a look at sort of current news and the situation around the world. Eventually people just kind of get tired of feeling depressed or anxious or worried. And the easiest thing to do is just kind of numb themselves to all these potential negative emotions that are flooding in. Do you have just any quick bit of advice for any listener basically saying it may be bad, but there's maybe some value in dealing with them rather than trying to shut them out?

Brett Ford ([03:59](#))

I mean, these are very stressful times and it feels really challenging to provide any advice because I think if people are getting out of bed and doing what they need to do or not, then they're doing just fine. I think one thing we've learned is that trying to shut away emotions, judging emotions as kind of bad and useless, and having these feelings like, gosh, I really just want to get rid of this. That approach towards our negative emotions does not tend to yield beneficial outcomes. So what do you do instead? We've been learning a lot about emotional acceptance. This kind of sitting with and allowing yourself to have the feelings that you're having. It doesn't necessarily mean that you doom scroll all day and kind of sit in it.

Charles Blue ([05:00](#))

That would be easy.

Brett Ford ([05:01](#))

It is so easy. It's so easy. But allowing these feelings, which are natural to kind of arise and also they ebb and they flow. Our emotions don't necessarily have to be very long lasting. They are temporary

experiences. But that doesn't necessarily mean that we have to take everything that comes at us. If there are moments that are really intense, then engaging in some of these strategies that the field of emotion regulation science has been studying for a while can also be very effective in the short term. Right. So reaching out to friends and family, spending time with people who you love, playing a game, watching a movie, doing something that allows you to give your emotions a break can be a totally viable part of each of our kind of toolkits of emotional wellness. But the more we kind of judge how we're feeling and try to escape how we're feeling, it ends up creeping up on us and so kind of allowing and having some compassion for ourselves. It's a hard thing to do, but it's what I'm trying to do. So I suppose it would be folly for me not to offer it as advice as well.

Charles Blue ([06:16](#))

Well, that is good advice, and I will take it as well as I try to again parse through another day of doom scrolling out there in the world. I would like to thank you for joining me again. This is Charles Blue, speaking with Brett Ford, one of the winners of the 2022 APS Spence Award and a return guest to *Under the Cortex*. Thank you very much.

Brett Ford ([06:37](#))

Thank you.

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