

# A Good Mood Is a Good Motivator

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You need to alphabetize those files, transcribe last week's meeting, and then look up some tax codes, but actually motivating yourself to take care of these tedious tasks can be a real challenge. According to new research from APS Fellow James J. Gross (Stanford University) and colleagues, people are much more likely to take on boring, unpleasant tasks when they're in a good mood.

Using a smartphone app to gather data, Gross and colleagues were able to monitor the moods of over 28,000 people in real time across an average of 27 days. Their findings suggest that our affective state – whether we're feeling peppy and positive or bummed and blue – has a significant impact on whether we're in the mindset to tackle drudgery.

“Most theories of motivation propose that our daily choices of activities aim to maximize positive affective states but fail to explain when people decide to engage in unpleasant yet necessary activities,” the researchers write in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

One of the most popular theories for how our emotions shape our actions, and vice versa, is called the hedonic principle. According to the hedonic principle, we tend to choose activities that “aim to minimize negative affect and maximize positive affect.” Yet, most of us still head out the door every morning to go to work even though we'd probably be happier spending the afternoon binge-watching Netflix on the couch.

Most research on the hedonic principle has been carried out in tightly controlled lab experiments. Gross and colleagues wanted to know whether findings from the lab actually match up with our everyday decisions on how to spend our time.

“Although widely supported in the laboratory, the hedonic principle, without further specification, does not explain much of people's everyday behavior: if we always try to improve our moods, when are we

motivated to do the dishes, wait in line at the post office, or even go to work?,” the researchers note.

To get real-world data, the researchers turned to a smartphone application called 58sec ([www.58sec.com](http://www.58sec.com)). When downloaded to a smartphone, this French-language app presented participants with very short questionnaires (less than 58 seconds to complete) at random times throughout the day. Participants were asked to provide two pieces of information: “How do you currently feel?” and “What are you currently doing?” Mood was reported using a scale from 0 (very un-happy) to 100 (very happy) and current activities were chosen from a list of 25 possible options (e.g., working, studying, watching TV).

One key finding was that the interplay between current mood and activity choices followed a very specific pattern: When participants were in a bad mood, they were more likely to engage in activities that tended to subsequently boost their mood.

“Our findings demonstrate that people’s everyday decisions regarding which activities to undertake are directly linked to how they feel and follow a remarkably consistent pattern. People seek mood-enhancing activities when they feel bad and engage in unpleasant activities that might promise longer-term payoff when they feel good,” the researchers write.

For example, if an individual is feeling particularly upbeat on a Sunday morning, they are about 30% more likely to clean up their apartment later that afternoon compared to an individual feeling particularly unhappy.

“These findings clarify how emotions shape behavior and may explain how humans trade off short-term happiness for long-term welfare. Overcoming such trade-offs might be critical for our personal well-being and our survival as a species,” Gross and colleagues conclude.

## Reference

Taquet, M., Quoidbach, J., de Montjoye, Y. A., Desseilles, M., & Gross, J. J. (2016). Hedonism and the choice of everyday activities. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 113(35) 9769-9773. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1519998113