

Regrettably, Humans Mispredict Their Emotions After Decision Making

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Behavioral research over the past 15 years has confirmed what anyone who has purchased a house or dumped a significant other could tell you: When people make decisions, they anticipate that they may regret their choices. It is important that we maintain this ability, because as the aforementioned house-buyers and spouse-dumpers know, regret can be a terrible feeling.

How accurate are people in their anticipations of regret – and of other post-decisional emotions, such as disappointment? It is a topic has been rather neglected by scientists, but new research published in the August issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, aims to fill this gap.

In the first of two experiments, participants took part in a two-person negotiation for money that would allow the researchers to observe negotiation style as well as measure how much regret the participants would feel if their tactics failed. The researchers found that participants across the board tended to over-predict their post-negotiation regret and disappointment if their transaction was rejected. However, those who negotiated reasonably (i.e., less aggressive or “greedy”) were less prone to experience regret than the latter, as they had provided sensible offers.

In the second experiment, participants who had just completed a course assignment were asked to predict how they would feel if the grades that they received for their assignments exceeded, matched, or were lower than their expectations. On average, participants received higher than expected grades. However, the researchers found that participants over-predicted the rejoicing and somewhat under-predicted the regret that they experienced when they received the grades.

In the light of such misprediction of emotions, Nick Sevdalis and Nigel Harvey — the University College London researchers who authored the study — argue that when people make decisions they should perhaps discount the regret, rejoicing, and other post-decisional emotions that they anticipate will be associated with potential outcomes arising from those decisions.