

Want to be happier? Think like a bronze medalist

February 16, 2018

Athletes who win silver medals must be happier than those who win bronze, right? Not exactly. People in [one study rated athletes' emotions](#) — based on their facial expressions — immediately after they learned where they placed. On a 1- to 10-point agony-to-ecstasy scale, bronze medalists scored 7.1 on average, while the silver medalists averaged just 4.8. Later, on the awards podiums, the bronze medalists still got higher happiness scores, 5.7 to 4.3.

Why? Psychologists believe it stems from “counterfactual thinking,” or imagining the outcome that didn’t happen. Silver medalists focus on “I almost.” They can easily envision how they could have won the gold — nailing their landing, for example. So, they feel like they lost. Bronze medalists think “At least I.” They can picture not winning a medal at all. So, for them, third place is a win.

We all face situations every day where we feel like we win or lose. Say you get a [5 percent raise](#). That might feel great if your colleague got a 3 percent bump. If your colleague’s salary jumped 10 percent? Not so much.

“Happiness very much hinges on expectancies,” says E. Scott Geller, Ph.D., psychology professor and director of the Center for Applied Behavior Systems at Virginia Tech. So, what can we do to frame our expectations so we feel like we’re winning?