

Happy in Spite of Ourselves

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Fans of the long-running TV sitcom *Seinfeld* will remember the episode in which Jerry realizes he is “Even-Steven.” Everything in his universe balances out. He has an important work gig cancelled, but before he can wallow in his disappointment a different opportunity unexpectedly presents itself. He loses a \$20 bill, and the same amount of cash somehow finds its way back to him. The episode ends with his girlfriend breaking up with him. She expects hand-wringing, but instead she gets an unfazed shrug: “That’s fine,” he says cheerfully. “Someone else will come along.” He likes being Even-Steven.

And who wouldn’t like such certainty? But *Seinfeld* is fiction, and in real life few of us have the luxury of confidently knowing the future. Indeed, the opposite is true for most of us. When we experience a major disappointment, we’re more likely to envision the future as bleak, and ourselves as supremely unhappy. But most of the time, argues Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert, we’re wrong. As he explains in his new book *Stumbling on Happiness*, we constantly err in our forecasts of future misery — and future happiness. In short, we’re lousy at imagination.

But that doesn’t stop us from trying. In fact, Gilbert says, one thing that distinguishes the human brain from lesser brains is its ability to predict — to conjure up scenarios and situations that don’t yet exist. Our neurological wiring has programmed us to read “the hearts and minds of the people we’re about to become,” but unfortunately we’re not programmed to do it well. As with eyesight and memory, imagination is an imperfect talent, yet we make decisions and choices every day based largely on this cognitive “stumbling.”

Gilbert and his colleagues have run many experiments to explore emotional forecasting and its mishaps. For example, in one experiment volunteers were given a plate of potato chips to contemplate; nearby was another plate, containing either a very good chocolate or a tin of sardines. When the volunteers were asked to imagine eating the chips, and to rate the experience, those with chocolate nearby reported much less enjoyment than those with sardines nearby.

That in itself is not surprising. They were obviously comparing the imaginary chocolate with the imaginary canned fish, and it’s not a shock which won out. But here’s the interesting part: When they actually ate the chips, they liked them equally well whether there was chocolate or fish nearby. In other words, the predicted disappointment was illusory. It was based on a meaningless comparison. Actually munching chips trumped the imaginary version.

Such failures of imagination happen all the time outside the laboratory, Gilbert says, and they affect our life choices and our happiness. For instance, offer people a choice of jobs: One pays \$30,000 the first year, \$40,000 the second, and \$50,000 the third. Not bad. The other offers \$60,000 at first, but then only \$50,000, and finally \$40,000. Inexplicably, most people choose the first job, even though in the long run they will make less money. Why? The simple answer is that people hate pay cuts. The more complicated answer has to do with perversity of the human mind, which for unknown reasons favors relative

numbers over absolutes. In order to avoid the psychological discomfort of taking a pay cut, these people fail to imagine themselves three years hence, when their actual (and completely avoidable) loss of 30 grand will almost certainly make them very unhappy.

Here's one more example from the entertaining abundance that makes up *Stumbling*. Why is it, Gilbert asks, that most of us would drive clear across town to save \$50 on a \$100 radio, but wouldn't consider the same inconvenience to save \$50 on a \$100,000 car? The answer, again, is that we think in relative terms, not absolutes. Getting half off a nice radio is a great bargain. Getting that fancy car for \$99,950 is not a bargain at all; it's trivial. This kind of reasoning and behavior drives economists crazy, Gilbert says, because to an economist \$50 is \$50 is \$50. But paradoxically, it takes an act of supreme imagination to get to this obvious truth.

Gilbert has shown in other experiments that he can make these emotional forecasting errors go away. All he has to do is demonstrate the reasoning fallacy in action, and people then avoid the same mistake. But then the question is whether we want to make the most rational decision every time, and on this Gilbert is ambivalent. It could be that our distorted views of future happiness — or misery — serve some larger social purpose. Maybe we really don't want a world full of Even-Stevens.