

# Positively Negative

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Few disciplines of behavioral science, if any, have gathered more attention in recent years than positive psychology. The volume of happiness research that's poured from the labs of scientists such as APS Fellow Ed Diener and APS James McKeen Cattell and William James Fellow Martin Seligman has sparked enormous public interest and inspired countless popular books. Some of the appeal is no doubt the power of the work. Researchers have linked positive emotions with all sorts of social, cognitive, and physical health benefits. But some of it may just be that given a choice between feeling happy or not, most of us prefer the former.

What the positive psychology movement often fails to describe, however, are the boundaries of these benefits. It's great to feel good; it's less great to feel manic or to feel good when you're supposed to feel fear or anger or to make the pursuit of happiness your only goal in life. In a 2011 issue of *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, a group of researchers led by June Gruber of Yale University surveyed what they call the "dark side" of happiness: a grey line of literature that exposed the times, ways, and degrees to which the emotion stops being useful and starts being harmful.

"The more we can understand the limits of happiness, the more we can learn how to harness just the right amount of happiness," says Gruber, who calls her research a natural scientific response to the emergence of positive psychology. "Not too much, not too little, but just that right amount — to cultivate something that can enrich our lives."

One study highlighted by Gruber and company came from the lab of coauthor Iris Mauss at University of Denver (now at the University of California, Berkeley). Over the course of two experiments, Mauss and colleagues examined what happens when a person wants happiness too much. They suspected that because Western concepts of happiness are very personal — as opposed to communal — one's social connections might suffer if one pursues happiness too intensely.

Their first study found a simple correlation between how much people valued happiness and how much loneliness they reported in a diary during stressful events. Mauss and company then wanted to isolate a cause of this loneliness, so they recruited 43 women to watch a 35-minute film clip about intimacy and relationships. Before viewing the clip, some of the women read a news piece about the benefits of happiness, while others read a neutral article.

The happiness group reported significantly greater loneliness after the film than the neutral group, the researchers report in a 2011 issue of the journal *Emotion*. "Thus, *wanting* to be happy may sometimes have opposite effects than *being* happy," they conclude. "Therefore, it may be that to reap the benefits of happiness people should want it less."

They should also want it at the right moment. Gruber and colleagues made it clear in their review that happiness isn't the best emotion when it arrives at an inopportune time. Take a study of happiness and

suspicion conducted by Australian researchers, APS Fellow Joseph Forgas and Rebekah East of the University of New South Wales.

Forgas and East brought 117 test subjects into a lab and primed them with video clips for positive emotions (a British comedy), negative emotions (a cancer film), or neutrality (a nature scene). Afterward, study participants watched an interrogation about an alleged theft of a movie ticket, then judged the veracity of the suspect being questioned. The researchers had arranged the situation so that some of the suspects were guilty of the crime and some innocent, but all denied it.

When a suspect was innocent, the moods of the test participants didn't distort their judgments. Happy, sad, and neutral subjects alike seemed to recognize that the person had not stolen the ticket. When a suspect was guilty, however, those in the positive and neutral groups were much worse at detecting the deception than those in the negative one. In fact, those two groups failed to identify guilty suspects at a level above chance. In a word, Forgas and East report in a 2008 issue of the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, happiness can make us gullible.

The flipside of this work is that negativity can sometimes provide a healthy amount of skepticism. Forgas is at the forefront of a line of research that embraces what might be called the bright side of sadness. Over the years, he's connected negative emotions to heightened memory, forceful persuasion, and an ability to avoid the fundamental attribution error. Just as the positive psychology movement sometimes overlooks the limits of happiness, it also fails at times to account for the fact that negativity must have advantages too.

"I think positive psychology has an important message, but it only tells us half the story," says Forgas. "Over millennia, human beings evolved a rich repertoire of affective reactions, and it stands to reason that negative affect must have important adaptive functions as well. ... I think it is a mistake to emphasize that one set of affective states — such as positive affect — is universally beneficial, and negative affective states are always harmful."

Forgas and colleague Hui Bing Tan of New South Wales recently concluded a series of three experiments demonstrating that negative emotions can make us more equitable people. In one test, 45 participants were primed for positive or negative moods based on feedback they received after a bogus geometry quiz. They then took part in an empirical mainstay known as the dictator game, which is essentially an allocation task that tests selfishness. In this case, participants had to choose how to distribute 10 raffle tickets for a \$20 prize between themselves and a partner.

When the partner was a total stranger, happy participants kept more tickets for themselves than sad ones did, Tan and Forgas reported in a 2010 issue of the *Journal of Experimental Society Psychology*. That trend held true even when the partners were members of the participant's own in-group — fellow students with similar campus affiliations. Negative participants distributed the tickets fairly no matter what the circumstances were.

In a subsequent test, a group of 64 participants were primed first for happiness or sadness, then again for fairness or unfairness. Tan and Forgas found that the fairness factor moderated the mood factor in interesting ways. When fairness was emphasized, happy and sad players both allocated items fairly during a dictator game. But happy players became significantly more selfish than sad ones after a

suggestion of inequality, suggesting that a negative mood has a positive effect on selfishness.

Another recent study found an unusual benefit to negativity: accepting it may help people reduce feelings of depression. A research group led by Amanda Shallcross of the University of Denver recruited 55 people who'd recently been through a stressful experience that had a negative impact on their lives. The participants completed questionnaires that assessed stress, depressive symptoms, and acceptance, which the researchers defined as embracing, and not avoiding, negative emotions.

Four months later, the same participants completed a similar assessment. When Shallcross and colleagues analyzed the two self-reports, they found that the only people to feel an increase in their depressive symptoms and stress were those who measured low on acceptance. The paradoxical result, reported in a 2010 issue of *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, is that a certain level of comfort with negativity may actually help a person feel less negative.

“By pretending that happiness and positivity are universally desirable and attainable, we are probably creating an unrealistic popular expectation that leaves many people less happy and satisfied than they could otherwise be,” says Forgas. “A more realistic and balanced view in popular culture, recognizing and accepting the beneficial functions of both positive and negative affective states, would probably result in greater overall life satisfaction than does the unilateral promotion of positivity.”

Other recent work echoes this idea of achieving better balance between positive and negative emotions. In another 2011 issue of *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, Adam Grant of the University of Pennsylvania and APS Fellow Barry Schwartz of Swarthmore College remind the field of positive psychology that Aristotle once said the secret to true happiness lies in moderation. They encourage more attention to what's called the “inverted U,” a theory that positive behaviors, if they go too far, actually swing around and become negative ones.

Gruber agrees that emotional balance is the healthy goal, and some of her most recent work suggests that stability is also important. Working with Mauss and other colleagues, Gruber recently tracked emotional variability in two large samples, one in Denver (over two weeks) and another in France (over a single day). In an upcoming issue of *Emotion*, the researchers report that people who showed greater emotional variability had worse health outcomes — decreased life satisfaction and functioning, and increased symptoms of depression and anxiety.

“It's not only that we have this obsessive pursuit of happiness, but we also have this obsessive avoidance of negative emotions,” says Gruber. “That creates an imbalance in our emotional ecosystem. We're not hard-wired to just feel happy — we'd be neglecting a lot of important cues in our environment if we were feeling chronically happy all the time.”