

Publication: Channel News Asia Online

Date: 24 July 2017

Headline: Commentary: Satisfaction, meaning and the importance of positive experiences

Commentary: Satisfaction, meaning and the importance of positive experiences

SINGAPORE: A large body of research supports the notion that bad is stronger than good. Losing S\$50 decreases one's happiness more than gaining S\$50 increases it. A person's likability can be harmed more by a single negative act than it is helped by a single positive act.

On average, we seem to respond more to negative stimuli than to positive stimuli. As newspaper publishers have frequently observed based on what readers consume, "if it bleeds, it leads".

This phenomenon - known by psychologists as negativity bias - may actually be a useful dynamic. A greater sensitivity to negative stimuli can help organisms avoid threats and increase their chances of survival.

A case of food poisoning at a restaurant is enough to repulse many people from eating there again. Earning a Michelin star, on the other hand, does not attract people to the same degree. Overlooking the accolades of a restaurant has little consequence for our lives; whereas overlooking a food safety violation can result in a trip to the hospital.

What does negativity bias imply for our own sense of well-being? Struggles, failures, mishaps and conflict are a part of everyday life. Negative events can range from the trivial to the traumatic. At the same time, a lot of good things happen during the day: An energising run, a perfect cup of coffee, a comforting hug, a successfully completed project, or dinner with a close friend.

PALETTE OF FEELINGS

Indeed, daily life is not monochromatic; it is a palette of colours. At the end of the day, what is the picture that we paint? My PhD student, Lee Huey Woon, and I attempted to answer this question in a series of studies. We tracked the daily well-being of 900 participants for up to three weeks.

To capture both positive and negative experiences, participants rated how much they felt a range of emotions including happiness, sadness, contentment, anger, joy and worry. We collected 9,255 snapshots of daily life - a rich tapestry of emotions and life experiences.

Many people had wonderful days, reporting high levels of positive emotion and very little negative emotion. Some people had terrible days, which came with high levels of negative emotion and very little positive emotion. Most days for them, however, were a mixture of positive and negative experiences.

At the end of each day, we also asked participants how satisfied they were with their life that day, and how personally meaningful their day was. Not surprisingly, days that were overwhelmingly positive were the most satisfying and meaningful, and days that were overwhelmingly negative were the least.

What about days that were equally positive and negative? Intuitively, such days should be neutral. Think of a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 refers to almost no emotion and 100 refers to an extreme level of emotion; there should be no difference between a day that was equally low on both positives and negatives versus a day that was equally high on both.

On a calculator, whether you enter 10 minus 10 or 90 minus 90, the result is the same. In both cases, we should observe middling levels of satisfaction and meaning.

On the other hand, if negativity bias pervades our sense of well-being, a day that was great in some ways but awful in others should be worse than a day on which almost nothing good or bad happens. The terrible events should overshadow the terrific ones and ruin our day. An uneventful day may be boring but better precisely because nothing bad happened.

Publication: Channel News Asia Online

Date: 24 July 2017

Headline: Commentary: Satisfaction, meaning and the importance of positive experiences

PEOPLE PLACE MORE WEIGHT ON POSITIVE EXPERIENCES

It turns out that people do not think like calculators. Nor do they always concede to the negatives. Instead, participants placed more weight on their positive experiences. We found that a day that was terrific and terrible brought more satisfaction and meaning than a day that was largely uneventful.

Most of our participants were Singaporean college students - so it is fair to ask whether our findings simply reflect youthful optimism. We conducted another study on almost 1,500 adults in the US (aged 18 to 81). The results were the same.

According to the psychologist Shelley Taylor, when something bad happens, we work quickly to neutralise its effects; when something good happens, the same kind of urgency is not there. In addition, we are more inclined to share our positive experiences than our negative experiences with others. At the end of the day then, the positives may stick out more than the negatives.

But there may be more to it than that. In another study, we found that even when people are reminded of their good and bad experiences, the positives still carried more weight. A day that was equally terrible and terrific was still more satisfying and meaningful than an uneventful day, even when people were more aware of just how awesome and awful it was.

UNDERESTIMATE OUR CAPACITY FOR RESILIENCE?

So it appears that meaning and satisfaction thrive more on the presence of positives than on the absence of negatives. Positive experiences may indicate that important goals and values have been met, thereby strengthening our sense of satisfaction and meaning even when negative experiences have also occurred.

This has important implications for daily life. So many things we do involve mixtures of positives and negatives. Work brings a lot of challenges but those challenges may be the reasons why we feel accomplished when we succeed. Raising a toddler can be a marathon of dirty diapers and temper tantrums, but also an important source of love, joy and amusement.

Although we all would prefer to avoid bad outcomes, the positivity dominance effect suggests that negative experiences can be tolerated as long as they do not prevent positive experiences from arising. We may be underestimating our daily capacity for resilience.

About two months before he died of cancer, basketball coach Jimmy Valvano delivered a moving speech in which he advised the audience to do three things every day: "If you laugh, you think and you cry, that's a full day. That's a heck of a day."

Surely, we can all appreciate the joy of laughter, but crying? Valvano was referring to the tears we shed when we are moved emotionally - including tears of happiness. Interestingly, his second advice is to think - to be in thought.

To me this is wise - as if to say that in between laughing and crying, we should take time to reflect. In the worst moments of our life, it is easy to lose ourselves in our emotions. However, finding meaning may require us to pause, take a step back, and look at the bigger picture of where we've been, where we are now, and how we can move forward.

Reflecting may help us realise an important lesson for the future. Or it may help us recognise the good that still surrounds us. Even on our better days, taking a moment to appreciate and savour the experience may enhance meaning and satisfaction.

Publication: Channel News Asia Online

Date: 24 July 2017

Headline: Commentary: Satisfaction, meaning and the importance of positive experiences

In this way we can strengthen the positive foundation that undergirds our sense of well-being, helping it withstand the occasional storms of everyday life.

William Tov is associate professor of psychology at the Singapore Management University. His research interests include well-being and the social and cultural influences that impact well-being.

Source: CNA/sl