

Humans are prone to "it could have been better" or "if only" thinking. Such counterfactual thinking has implications on personal and political life.



BY INVITATION

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Why bronze medallists are happier than silver winners

AFTER something has happened, or an outcome is known, people often think about how things could have turned out differently. They imagine what it could have been.

This typically occurs when they wish something had or had not happened. They think counterfactually to reality by thinking "If only..."

Counterfactual thinking also occurs when people imagine how things could have been worse. These thoughts often begin with "If I had..." or "If I had not..."

Counterfactual thoughts are widespread in personal life, at the workplace and in politics. It occurs when we think about what we or others have done, or not done.

Psychological research tells us a lot about counterfactual thinking. This knowledge is useful for improving our own lives and the lives of others.

Counterfactual thinking is ubiquitous

IT IS human to think counterfactually. Counterfactual thinking occurs in all areas of life, and more often than we realise.

It occurs when we regret doing something - "If only I had driven home by the usual route, I would not have been caught in the traffic jam."

The regret can also be over not doing something - "If only I had read that news article, I would have answered the question correctly."

We think counterfactually when we are upset or assign blame. Here is a common refrain from advisers - "If he had followed my suggestion, we would have prevented this public outcry."

Counterfactual thinking also occurs when we feel relieved or grateful. After a workplace incident, employees may think that if the company had not implemented safety measures, there would have been fatalities in the incident.

Often, counterfactual thinking is used to help people console others or themselves. Accident victims may feel better when they imagine that the outcome could have been worse.

When are people more likely to think counterfactually?

Research has identified four factors. They are ease, closeness, exception and controllability.

First, counterfactual thinking is more likely when it is easy to reconstruct the past event and imagine alternative situations that did not happen.

The second is when the actual outcome is close to an alternative outcome. That is why "near-misses" are powerful.

When students missed a mark to get into the next higher grade category, or when they just made a grade with the lowest mark in the grade category, the "what it

could have been" scenario produces strong emotions and actions. And gamblers know what it is like to miss the winning combination by one number.

Third, if the negative outcome is perceived to be due to an exceptional action that is non-routine, it leads to powerful counterfactual thoughts that last longer and recur more.

For example, taking a new route and then getting into an accident produces "If only..."

thoughts that do not seem to go away.

Finally, counterfactual thoughts are more likely when we believe that the outcome was due to a controllable event. Say a man had a drink with colleagues after work and was caught in a traffic jam due to a fallen tree.

He returned home too late to save his wife, who had a fatal heart attack. The man is more likely to mentally undo the controllable event and think, "If only I had not gone for a drink..."

We are more likely to think counterfactually when we believe that something could have been done to prevent the negative event.

Ups and downs of counterfactual thinking

COMPARED to what has happened (reality), the counterfactual thinking may be upward (thinking of what might be better) or downward (what's worse).

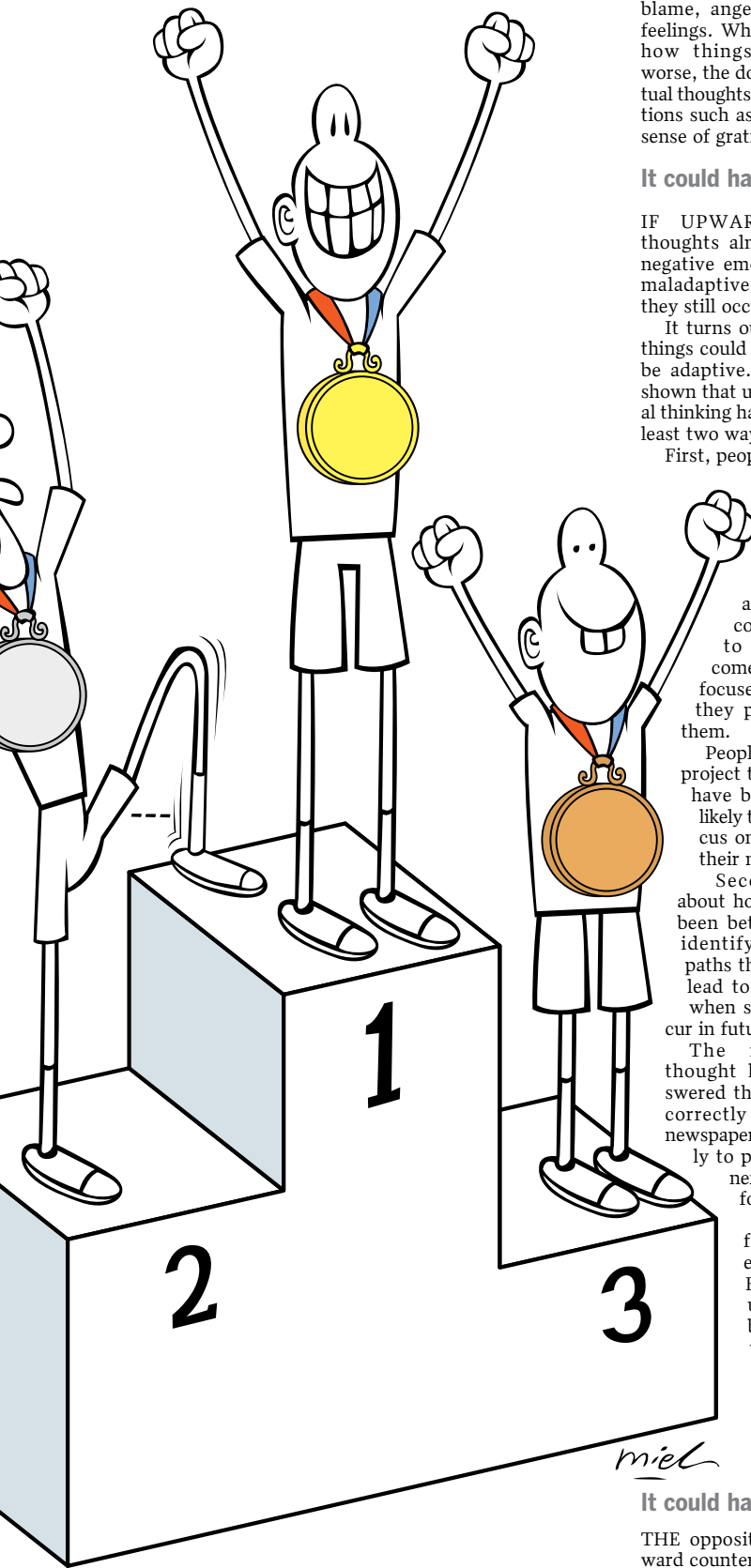
This is illustrated in a famous study conducted two decades ago by psychologist Victoria Husted Medvec and her colleagues.

The researchers videotaped the emotional reactions of bronze and silver medallists at the 1992 Summer Olympics, at the conclusion of their events and at the medal stand. The analyses of their emotions showed that bronze medallists are happier than silver medallists.

This does not make sense if we apply an objective criterion to happiness. After all, second is ranked higher than third.

Counterfactual thinking explains why less is more.

The silver medallist is thinking an upward counterfactual about winning gold. For the bronze medallist, the downward counterfactual



blame, anger or other negative feelings. When they are thinking how things could have been worse, the downward counterfactual thoughts lead to positive emotions such as feeling relieved or a sense of gratitude.

It could have been better

IF UPWARD counterfactual thoughts almost always lead to negative emotions, are they not maladaptive thinking? Why do they still occur so often?

It turns out that thinking how things could have been better can be adaptive. Many studies have shown that upward counterfactual thinking has learning value in at least two ways.

First, people are motivated to learn from mistakes to avoid the negative emotions generated by upward counterfactual thoughts. They become more motivated to prevent bad outcomes. They will be more focused on their goals, and they persevere to achieve them.

People who thought how a project they completed could have been better are more likely to work harder and focus on doing a good job in their next project.

Second, by thinking about how things could have been better, people are also identifying the different paths that are more likely to lead to a positive outcome when similar situations occur in future.

The interviewee who thought he would have answered the interview question correctly if he had read the newspaper that morning is likely to prepare better for the next interview, and perform better.

Upward counterfactual thinking causes negative emotions. But it has learning value that can lead to better outcomes in future.

Thinking how it could have been better can be short-term pain but long-term gain.

It could have been worse

THE opposite applies to downward counterfactual.

Thinking how it could have been worse may be comforting, but it may make one complacent and less likely to learn from mistakes and improve.

When we think it could have been worse, we are also thinking that the current reality is not that bad. So we are less likely to ask what went wrong. It means we

Counterfactual thinking explains why less is more. The silver medallist is thinking an upward counterfactual about winning gold. For the bronze medallist, the downward counterfactual thought is finishing without a medal.

are less likely to see the current problems that are preventing a better outcome.

Simple problems left undetected can accumulate over time to become more difficult ones. So thinking how it could have been worse may be short-term gain but long-term pain.

Which is why consoling or advising others or ourselves using only downward counterfactual thinking is not always a good thing. This is especially when it is not accompanied by an attempt to figure out what went wrong.

When we think "If only..." and all it leads to is regret, anger, griping or ruminating about the past, our counterfactual thoughts are working in a counterproductive way.

When we respond to criticisms and negativity by thinking it could have been worse and begin to feel better, it may not be a good thing. Counterfactual thinking can help more than it hurts.

When we are able to regulate our emotions and mitigate the negative effects of counterfactual thinking, we become more resilient to hardships and failures.

When we use counterfactual thinking constructively to learn from mistakes and diagnose problems, it helps us become better problem-solvers. We become more adaptive to changes.

Finally, the influence that counterfactual thinking has on emotions, thoughts and actions is very strong when it involves values and affects people's lives in many ways.

In such situations, when people are thinking what it could have been, they are also thinking what it should have been and what it would have been.

Issues of immigration are good examples. Both citizens and policymakers may be thinking how Singaporeans' quality of life could or might have been if the Government had let in fewer foreigners in the past few years.

Some are thinking upward counterfactuals whereas others are thinking downward counterfactuals. Either way, the counterfactual thinking has a large impact on how one feels and what one thinks and decides to do.

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