



# Negativity Bias

## Take in the good!

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Scientists believe that your brain has a built-in negativity bias. This is because, as our ancestors dodged sticks and chased carrots over millions of years of evolution, the sticks had the greater urgency and impact on survival.

This negativity bias shows up in lots of ways. For example, studies have found that:

The brain generally reacts more to a negative stimulus than to an equally intense positive one.

Animals - including us - typically learn faster from pain than from pleasure; once burned, twice shy.

Painful experiences are usually more memorable than pleasurable ones

Most people will work harder to avoid losing something they have than they'll work to gain the same thing.

Lasting, good relationships typically need at least a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative interactions.

In your own mind, what do you usually think about at the end of the day? The fifty things that went right, or the one that went wrong? Such as the driver who cut you off in traffic, or the one thing on your To Do list that didn't get done . . .

In effect, the brain is like Velcro for negative experiences, but Teflon for positive ones. That shades implicit memory - your underlying feelings, expectations, beliefs, inclinations, and mood- in an increasingly negative direction.

Which is not fair, since most of the facts in your life are probably positive or at least neutral. Besides the injustice of it, the growing pile of negative experiences in implicit memory naturally makes a person more anxious, irritable, and blue - plus it gets harder to be patient and giving toward others.

But you don't have to accept this bias! By tilting toward the good - toward that which brings more happiness and benefit to oneself and others - you merely level the playing field. Then, instead of positive experiences washing through you like water through a sieve, they'll collect in implicit memory deep down in your brain.

You'll still see the tough parts of life. In fact, you'll become more able to change them or bear them if you take in the good, since that will help put challenges in perspective, lift your energy and spirits, highlight useful resources, and fill up your own cup so you have more to offer to others.

And by the way, in addition to being good for adults, taking in the good is great for children, too, helping them to become more resilient, confident, and happy.

## **So How Do We Level the Playing Field and Tilt Toward the Good?**

1. Look for good facts, and turn them into good experiences.

Good facts include positive events - like finishing a batch of e-mails or getting a compliment - and positive aspects of the world and yourself. Most good facts are ordinary and relatively minor - but they are still real. You are not looking at the world through rose-colored glasses, but simply recognizing something that is actual and true.

Then, when you're aware of a good fact-either something that currently exists or has happened in the past - let yourself feel good about it. So often in life a good thing happens - flowers are blooming, someone is nice, a goal's been attained - and you know it, but you don't feel it. This time, let the good fact affect you. Try to do this step and the two that follow at least a half dozen times a day. When you do this, it usually takes only half a minute or so -

there is always time to take in the good! You can do it on the fly in daily life, or at special times of reflection, like just before falling asleep (when the brain is especially receptive to new learning).

Be aware of any reluctance toward having positive experiences. Such as thinking that you don't deserve to, or that it's selfish, vain, or shameful to feel pleasure. Or that if you feel good, you will lower your guard and let bad things happen.

Then turn your attention back to the good facts. Keep opening up to them, breathing and relaxing, letting them move your needle. It's like sitting down to a meal: don't just look at it - taste it!

## 2. Really enjoy the experience.

Most of the time, a good experience is pretty mild, and that's fine. Simply stay with it for ten, twenty, even thirty seconds in a row - instead of getting distracted by something else.

Soften and open around the experience; let it fill your mind; give over to it in your body. (From a meditative perspective, this is a kind of concentration practice - for a dozen seconds or more - in which you become absorbed in a positive experience.) The longer that something is held in awareness and the more emotionally stimulating it is, the more neurons that fire and thus wire together, and the stronger the trace in implicit memory.

In this practice, you are not clinging to positive experiences, since that would lead to tension and disappointment. Actually, you are doing the opposite: by taking them in, you will feel better fed inside, and less fragile or needy. Your happiness will become more unconditional, increasingly based on an inner fullness rather than on external conditions.

## 3. Intend and sense that the good experience is sinking in to you.

People do this in different ways. Some feel it in the body as a warm glow spreading through the chest like the warmth of a cup of hot cocoa on a cold wintry day. Others visualize things like a golden syrup sinking down inside; a child might imagine a jewel going into a treasure chest in his or her heart. And some might simply know that while this good experience is held in awareness, its related neural networks are busily firing and wiring together.

Any single time of taking in the good will usually make just a little difference. But over time those little differences will add up, gradually weaving positive experiences into the fabric of your brain and your whole being.

In particular, as you do the practices in this book - or engage any process of psychological healing and growth, or spiritual development - really take in the fruits of your efforts. Help them stick to your mental/neural ribs!

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