

Embracing negative emotions could boost psychological well-being

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Researchers say that accepting negative emotions could make us feel better.

When feelings of sadness or disappointment take hold, most of us do our utmost to escape them. However, according to new research, embracing these darker emotions is more likely to benefit psychological health in the long-term.

In a study of more than 1,300 adults, researchers found that people who regularly try to resist negative emotions may be more likely to experience symptoms of mood disorders months later, compared with subjects who accept such emotions.

Lead study author Brett Ford, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Toronto in Canada, and colleagues recently reported their findings in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Previous research has suggested that acceptance - whether it is embracing our good and bad attributes, or accepting the way we look - is associated with better psychological well-being.

For this latest study, Prof. Ford and team sought to determine how acceptance of negative emotions - such as sadness, disappointment, and anger - might influence psychological health.

Embrace or avoid negative feelings?

To reach their findings, the researchers conducted three experiments, the first of which involved 1,003 participants. All subjects completed a survey, in which they were asked to rate how strongly they agreed with certain statements, such as "I tell myself I shouldn't be feeling the way that I'm feeling."

The researchers found that participants who had lower agreement with such statements as these - indicating a greater acceptance of negative feelings - showed higher levels of psychological well-being, compared with subjects who attempted to resist negative feelings.

In the second experiment - involving 156 participants - subjects were asked to record a 3-minute speech as part of a mock job application, which they were told would be shown to a panel of judges. The subjects were given 2 minutes to prepare their speech, and they were instructed to promote their relevant skills.

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A short, leisurely walk could do wonders for psychological health, say researchers.

Once the recording was complete, each subject was asked to report how they felt about the task.

The team found that participants who tried to avoid feeling negativity about the task were more likely to experience distress, compared with subjects who embraced any negative feelings.

The third study involved 222 participants. For 2 weeks, each subject was asked to keep a journal to record any bad experiences, as well as their emotions in response to such experiences. Participants were followed-up with a psychological assessment 6 months later.

The researchers found that subjects who reported trying to avoid negative emotions in response to bad experiences were more likely to have symptoms of mood disorders, such as anxiety and depression, 6 months later, compared with those who embraced their negative emotions.

"We found that people who habitually accept their negative emotions experience fewer negative emotions, which adds up to better psychological health," says senior study author Iris Mauss, an associate professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley.

Acceptance may be key to stress coping

Overall, the team believes that when bad things happen, it may be better to let negative emotions run their course rather than trying to avoid them.

"It turns out that how we approach our own negative emotional reactions is really important for our overall well-being. People who accept these emotions without judging or trying to change them are able to cope with their stress more successfully." Prof. Brett Ford

"Maybe if you have an accepting attitude toward negative emotions, you're not giving them as much attention," speculates Prof. Mauss. "And perhaps, if you're constantly judging your emotions, the negativity can pile up."

The researchers now plan to investigate how an individual's upbringing influences their later experiences of negative emotions and their acceptance of such feelings.