

Lean Into Negative Emotions. It's the Healthy Thing to Do.

Recent research suggests that while bad feelings can affect your well-being, your perspective on those feelings can play an even bigger role in your mental health.

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4 MIN READ

We're nervous about an upcoming work presentation, then lament our lack of confidence. We get angry at our partner, then feel guilty about our impatience. Our emotions undoubtedly influence our well-being — but recent research suggests that how we judge and react to those emotions may affect us even more.

In a study published last month in the journal *Emotion*, researchers found that people who habitually judge negative feelings — such as sadness, fear and anger — as bad or inappropriate have more anxiety and depression symptoms and feel less satisfied with their lives than people who generally perceive their negative emotions in a positive or neutral light.

The findings add to a growing body of research that indicates people fare better when they accept their unpleasant emotions as appropriate and healthy, rather than try to fight or suppress them.

“Many of us have this implicit belief that emotions themselves are bad, they're going to do something bad to us,” said Iris Mauss, a social psychologist who studies emotions at the University of California, Berkeley, and a co-author of the new study. But most of the time, she said, “emotions don't do harmful things.”

“It's actually the judgment that causes, ultimately, the suffering.”

Why judging your feelings can backfire

When we perceive our emotions as bad, we pile more bad feelings onto our existing ones, which makes us feel even worse, said Emily Willroth, a psychologist at Washington University in St. Louis and a co-author of the new study. It is likely to increase both the intensity of our negative feelings and the amount of time we suffer from them. Instead of

having a feeling naturally pass after a few minutes, “you might be ruminating on it an hour later,” she said.

Avoiding or suppressing feelings can be counterproductive, too. In a small clinical trial, researchers asked people to put one of their hands into an ice water bath and to either accept their feelings of pain or to suppress them. Those who tried to suppress their feelings reported more pain and couldn’t endure the ice water for as long as those who accepted their discomfort. Other research has linked emotional suppression with an increased risk for mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety.

“What one resists, persists,” said Amanda Shallcross, a naturopathic physician who studies emotion regulation at the Cleveland Clinic. When you avoid your emotions, “you’re bound to experience longer-term negative mental and physical health.”

Research also suggests that if you have a habit of negatively judging your emotions, you can become more upset when faced with a stressful situation. In a 2018 study, Dr. Mauss and her colleagues asked individuals whether they tended to accept their emotions or judge them as bad. Then they asked subjects to give a three-minute speech about their qualifications for a job — a task known to induce stress. Participants who said they didn’t usually accept their emotions reported experiencing more negative feelings while they gave the speech. In a follow-up experiment, the researchers found that subjects who didn’t usually accept their emotions reported worse psychological well-being and had more depression and anxiety symptoms six months later.

How to make peace with your feelings

First, remember that unpleasant feelings are part of the human experience. “No emotion is inherently bad or inappropriate,” Dr. Willroth said. Negative feelings can even serve a purpose, she added. “Anxiety can help you to face a potential threat, anger can help you stand up for yourself and sadness can signal to other people that you need their social support.”

When you experience a bad feeling, you don’t have to love the feeling, just try to feel neutral about it. The new study found that people who reacted neutrally were just as psychologically healthy as those who reacted more positively. Dr. Shallcross suggested approaching the feeling with curiosity and “using your body and your experience as a laboratory: ‘What’s here?’”

It may also help to remember that the feeling won’t be around forever. “Emotions are typically short-lived — and so if we just let them pass, often they will resolve in a matter

of seconds or minutes,” Dr. Willroth said.

Practice and experience may also make emotional acceptance easier. Emotional well-being increases with age, and Dr. Shallcross’s research has found that this could partially stem from the fact that people are generally better at accepting their emotions as they get older.

It’s important to note that accepting emotions is different from accepting the situations that cause bad emotions. “When we talk about accepting feelings, people often hear that as saying, ‘Oh, you should just be complacent,’” said Brett Ford, a psychologist at the University of Toronto who studies how people manage their emotions. But that’s not the right conclusion, she said. If anything, emotional acceptance could make change easier: If we aren’t focusing our time and energy on critiquing our feelings, we have more time and energy to better our lives and change the world.