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For the New Year, Say No to Negativity; Bad experiences affect us much more powerfully than good ones, but there are ways to deal with this destructive bias and overcome it

By John Tierney and Roy F. Baumeister

PHOTO: James Yang

The new year is supposed to bring hope, but too often it feels grim. We resolve to be virtuous—to lose weight, to exercise, to unplug from social media—but we recall past failures and fear another losing struggle. We toast to a better, happier world in 2020, but we know there will be endless bad news and vitriol, especially this election year.

We could use a fresh approach. For 2020, here's a resolution that could actually work: Go on a low-bad diet.

Our minds and lives are skewed by a fundamental imbalance that is just now becoming clear to scientists: the negativity effect. Also known as the negativity bias, it's the universal tendency for bad events and emotions to affect us more strongly than positive ones. We're devastated by a word of criticism but unmoved by a shower of praise. We see the hostile face in the crowd and miss all the friendly smiles. We focus so much on bad news, especially in a digital world that magnifies its power, that we don't realize how much better life is becoming for people around the world.

The negativity effect sounds depressing—and it often is—but it doesn't have to be the end of the story. By recognizing it and overriding our innate responses, we can break destructive patterns, make smarter decisions, see the world more realistically and also exploit the benefits of this bias. Bad is stronger than good, but good can prevail if we know what we're up against.

The negativity effect is a fundamental aspect of psychology, yet it was discovered only in the past two decades and quite unexpectedly, as social scientists became intrigued by a couple of patterns. Psychologists studying people's reactions had found that a bad first impression had a much greater impact than a good first impression, and experiments by behavioral economists had shown that a financial loss loomed much larger than a corresponding financial gain.

What gave bad its greater power? To investigate, the social psychologist Roy Baumeister (co-author of this piece) and colleagues at Case Western University looked for situations in which bad events didn't have such a strong impact. They proposed to "identify several contrary patterns" that would enable them to "develop an elaborate, complex and nuanced theory about when bad is stronger versus when good is stronger."

But they couldn't. To their surprise, despite scouring the research literature in psychology, sociology, economics, anthropology and other disciplines, they couldn't find compelling counterexamples of good being stronger.

Studies showed that bad health or bad parenting makes much more difference than good health or good parenting. A negative image (a photograph of a dead animal) stimulates more electrical activity in the brain than does a positive image (a bowl of chocolate ice cream). The pain of criticism is much stronger than the pleasure of praise. A single bad event can produce lifelong trauma, but there is no psychological term for the opposite of trauma because no good event has such a lasting impact.

The psychologists had discovered a major phenomenon, one that extended into so many different fields that the overall pattern had escaped notice. While writing up the results, Dr. Baumeister happened to visit the University of Pennsylvania and learned that a psychologist there, Paul Rozin, was also working on a paper about this effect, and they agreed to share credit in 2001 by publishing their findings simultaneously. Dr. Rozin's paper, "Negativity Bias, Negativity Dominance and Contagion," co-written with Edward Royzman, was published in the journal Personality and Social Psychology Review. Dr. Baumeister's paper, co-authored with Ellen Bratslavsky, Kathleen Vohs and Catrin Finkenauer, was published in the Review of General Psychology and titled simply "Bad Is Stronger Than Good."

Both are now among the most cited papers in the social-science literature. They've inspired psychologists and a wide range of other researchers to conduct hundreds of studies of the negativity effect, discovering it in new places, analyzing its effects and testing ways to exploit it when it's useful and overcome it when it's not.

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Our brain's negativity bias evolved because it is a survival mechanism. On our ancestral savanna, the hunter-gatherers who passed on their genes were the ones who paid more attention to threats (like poisonous berries or predatory lions) than to the good things in life. This bias is still useful—one mistake can still be fatal—but what worked for hunter-gatherers doesn't always work for us.

The urge to load up on fattening calories was useful in lean times on the savanna, but it can lead to obesity and ill health when junk food is available to tempt you all day long. Today we're assailed around the clock by the merchants of bad. Politicians and journalists tap into primal emotions by hyping threats from nature, technology, foreigners, political opponents—whatever will instantly trigger the brain's alarm circuits. The presidency of Donald Trump has been a ratings bonanza because it has brought out the worst on both sides. Rarely a week goes by without some new warning that civilization is doomed.

Once psychologists identified the negativity effect, they realized it had been distorting their own profession for a century. Because negative events had

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stronger effects, these phenomena were easier to distinguish and measure than positive ones, so psychology journals and textbooks had devoted more than twice as much space to analyzing problems than to identifying sources of happiness and well-being. The research was further distorted when it reached the public, because it was filtered through journalists eager for news with the most immediate impact—which, of course, meant bad news.

So the public learned lots about psychoses and depression but precious little about the mind's resilience and capacity for happiness. Post-traumatic stress disorder became common knowledge but not the concept of post-traumatic growth, which is actually far more common. Most people who undergo trauma ultimately feel that the experience has made them a stronger and better person.

After recognizing their own bias, psychologists began compensating for it by studying the "positivity ratio," which is the number of good events or emotions for every bad one. Researchers saw that older people are typically more contented than younger people because they've learned how to improve this ratio in their lives. They've gone on a low-bad diet, and that general approach can work for people of all ages. Here are a few strategies:

First, do no harm. We pride ourselves on the many good things we do for our family and friends, or for going the extra mile in pleasing customers and clients, but what really matters is what we don't do. Avoiding bad is far more important than doing good. You get relatively little credit for doing more than you promised, but you pay a big price for falling short.

By tracking couples over time, psychologists have found that the success of marriages depends mainly on the frequency of negative interactions and how people deal with negativity. In marriages destined for success, people overlook their spouse's flaws, maintaining what researchers call "positive illusions." When something goes wrong, they either give their spouse the benefit of the doubt or respond calmly so as not to escalate the conflict. In marriages that fail, people assume the worst and respond angrily—and because bad emotions are so powerful and contagious, a minor argument can quickly spiral into a major fight.

Minimizing the negative is similarly crucial in business. Angry customers can have such a disproportionate impact—especially the ones who post online reviews—that market researchers refer to them as "terrorists." Research into the varieties of "bad apples" in the workplace has shown that the performance of a team depends not on the average of its members' abilities but rather on the ability of the worst member. Several stars can't compensate for a dud.

Remember the Rule of Four. Many studies—of spouses' interactions, people's diaries, workers' moods, customers' ratings—have shown that a negative event or emotion usually has at least three times the impact of a comparable positive one. So to come out ahead, we suggest keeping in mind the Rule of Four: It takes four good things to overcome one bad thing.

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This is a rule of thumb, not a universal law of nature. It doesn't apply to every person in every situation, but it's a useful gauge of well-being and progress. If you and your partner are having sex four times more often than you fight, that's probably a healthy relationship. If you want to keep your business afloat, aim for at least four satisfied customers for every unsatisfied one. If you have four good days at work from Monday to Thursday, that's usually enough to make up for a bad Friday. (Obviously, that 4-to-1 ratio wouldn't be much comfort if on Friday you get fired, but that wouldn't be a typical week.)

Keep that ratio in mind when considering the impact of your actions. If you're late for one meeting, you won't redeem yourself by being early the next time. If you say or do something hurtful, don't expect to atone for it with one bit of goodwill. Plan on at least four compliments to make up for one bit of criticism.

Put the bad moments to good use. Instead of despairing at a setback, override your gut reaction and look for a useful lesson. The upside of the negativity effect is its power to teach and motivate. Penalties are usually more effective than rewards at spurring students and workers to improve. They're also more effective in motivating sinners to repent, which is why hell-fearing religions have historically grown faster than ones preaching a benevolent message.

The self-esteem movement—one of the sorrier mistakes in psychology—left many parents reluctant to criticize or penalize children, and the everybody-gets-a-trophy philosophy has produced rampant grade inflation in high school and college. Students routinely get As and Bs for mediocre or poor work, so they're learning less than in the past. No one likes getting—or handing out—bad grades, but these force the students to focus on what needs to be improved.

Capitalize on the good moments—and then relive them. Of all of Mark Twain's aphorisms, the one with the most empirical support is a bit of wisdom from the title character of Pudd'nhead Wilson: "To get the full value of a joy, you must have somebody to divide it with." Psychologists call it capitalization and have found that sharing good news is one of the most effective ways to become happier—but only if the other person responds enthusiastically, so make sure you rejoice in your friend's good fortune (or at least fake it).

Sharing good news makes the triumph more significant, so it's more likely to be recalled later, which is another proven way to boost happiness. Engaging in nostalgia was long considered a sign of depression, but experimenters have repeatedly found it's a tool not just for appreciating the past but also for brightening both the present and the future. One reason that happiness increases beyond middle age is that older people spend more time savoring good memories instead of obsessing about today's worries.

PHOTO: James Yang

See the big picture. Just about every measure of human welfare is improving except one: hope. The better life gets, the gloomier our worldview. In international surveys, it's the rich who sound the most pessimistic—and the worst informed. The global rate of poverty has declined by two thirds in recent decades, but most people in affluent countries think it has remained steady or gotten worse. Crime has plummeted in the U.S., but most Americans think it has risen because they see so much mayhem on their screens.

The same basic approaches for dealing with the power of bad in your personal relationships and business—minimize the negative, accentuate the positive—can help you to overcome the negative bias that skews politics and public opinion. When there's a school shooting or a terrorist attack, don't wallow for hours watching the live coverage. When politicians and pundits are attacking each other, switch channels. By choosing your online friends carefully and curating your news feed, you can follow the Rule of Four—at least four uplifting stories for every bad one—and get a much more accurate view of the world.

By rationally looking at long-term trends instead of viscerally reacting to the horror story of the day, you'll see that there's much more to celebrate than

to mourn. No matter what disasters occur in 2020, no matter who wins the presidential election, the average person in America and the rest of the world will in all likelihood become healthier and wealthier. Those who go on a low-bad diet will also become wiser—and happier, too.

Mr. Tierney is a contributing editor to City Journal, and Dr. Baumeister is a research psychologist at the University of Queensland. This essay is adapted from their new book, "The Power of Bad: How the Negativity Effect Rules Us and How We Can Rule It," published next week by Penguin Press.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

Do you or people you know dwell too much on bad experiences and overlook the good? Have you found ways to counteract that tendency? Join the conversation below.