

Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

C. Nathan DeWall and David G. Myers

C. Nathan DeWall, University of Kentucky, and renowned textbook author and APS Fellow David G. Myers, Hope College, have teamed up to create a new series of Observer columns aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom. Each column will offer advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal Current Directions in Psychological Science. Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bi-monthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications, and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to non-experts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.

The Upside of Being Down

by David G. Myers

[Forgas, J. P. \(2013\). Don't worry, be sad! On the cognitive, motivational and interpersonal benefits of negative mood. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22, 225–232.](#)

Happy moods are *good* moods. Happy moods don't just feel good, they brighten our thoughts and actions. When happy (rather than unhappy), we see the world as safer. We feel more confident. We make decisions more easily. We rate job applicants more favorably. We feel energized. We appreciate our relationships. We savor our positive past and project a hopeful future, without ruminating on the negative (Briñol, Petty, & Barden, 2007; Liberman, Boehm, Lyubomirsky, & Ross, 2009; Mauss, Shallcross, Troy, John, Ferrer, Wilhelm, & Gross, 2011).

In a gloomy mood, life feels depressing, even meaningless. The cynic in us comes out. But let our mood turn happy and our thinking broadens and becomes more creative (Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2008; Forgas, 2008; Fredrickson, 2009). When feeling good, we also *do* good. We become more likely to volunteer, to donate, or to help someone with dropped papers (Salovey, Mayer, & Rosenhan, 1991). Good moods work!

Surprisingly, bad moods can also have important benefits, notes APS Fellow Joseph Forgas (2013), a social psychologist who is currently Scientia Professor at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. Studies show that mild, temporary, negative moods can improve vigilance and attention to new information and so provide important adaptive advantages in some situations.

Before explaining Forgas's findings, instructors might ask students to take a couple minutes to write answers to two questions, and then to discuss their answers (either as a class or in small groups):

- 1) Given that good moods feel better and have benefits, *why are bad moods so common?*
- 2) For our distant ancestors, *what functions might negative moods, such as sadness, have served?*

Extreme moods — the hyper-optimism of ecstatic mania and the heavy lethargy of depression — come with a price. But normal, everyday mood variations — both good and bad — do have survival value, Forgas argues. Positive moods offer a “relax” signal. They imply a safe, familiar, nonthreatening situation in which we can rely on our preexisting, internal knowledge. Negative moods offer an “alarm” signal. Like a car’s oil pressure warning light, a negative mood primes our vigilance: it alerts us to problems and prepares us to pay closer attention to new, external information rather than relying on what we already know.

For the past 10 years Forgas and his colleagues have explored the cognitive and behavioral consequences of temporary mood states, using hypnosis, films, music, or writing to experimentally induce different mood states. Who among us would have predicted these documented *benefits* of induced negative moods?

Better memory: Those put in a negative mood are less vulnerable to forming false memories by incorporating misinformation.

Better judgment accuracy: Negative moods eliminate primacy effects, halo effects based on appearance, and vulnerability to the fundamental attribution error.

Reduced gullibility: Negative moods increase people’s ability to detect deception and reduce their acceptance of urban myths and rumors.

Reduced stereotyping: A negative mood has reduced reliance on stereotypes.

Strengthened motivation: A negative mood increases the reward value of expected future achievement and also reduces self-handicapping.

Enhanced social sensitivity: A negative mood leads to more cautious and polite interactions and communication.

Increased fairness: A negative mood increases focus on external fairness norms, which diminishes selfishness.

Greater persuasiveness: Those put in a negative mood produce higher-quality and more persuasive arguments.

Before describing these findings, instructors could offer students an experience of temporary mood inductions akin to those used in the experiments. For a sad mood, instructors might invite students to recall and write a short paragraph about sad, unpleasant experiences, perhaps while playing sad music, such as the songs at tinyurl.com/SadMoodMusic. To leave them in a good mood, instructors could invite students to recall and write a short paragraph about happy, joyous episodes, perhaps while playing happy music, such as the songs at tinyurl.com/HappyMoodMusic.

Informing students of the evidence for the cognitive, motivational, and social benefits of negative moods perhaps can reassure them of the adaptive value of all affective states. Knowing the up side to being down may help students accept their own everyday emotional fluctuations, and also to become more accepting of the benefits of a normal range of emotional reactions of their family members and friends. Star Trek’s Mr. Spock notwithstanding, all affective states can serve useful adaptive functions.

References

- Baas, M., De Dreu, C. K. W., & Nijstad, B. A. (2008). A meta-analysis of 25 years of mood-creativity research: Hedonic tone, activation, or regulatory focus? *Psychological Bulletin*, *134*, 779–806.
- Briñol, P., Petty, R. E., & Barden, J. (2007). Happiness versus sadness as a determinant of thought confidence in persuasion: A self-validation analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *93*, 711–727.
- Forgas, J. P. (2013). Don't worry, be sad! On the cognitive, motivational and interpersonal benefits of negative mood. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *22*, 225–232.
- Forgas, J. P. (2008). Affect and cognition. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *3*, 94–101.
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2006). The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. In M. Csikszentmihalyi & I. S. Csikszentmihalyi (Eds.), *A life worth living: Contributions to positive psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lieberman, V., Boehm, J. K., Lyubomirsky, S., & Ross, L. D. (2009). Happiness and memory: Affective significance of endowment and contrast. *Emotion*, *9*, 666–680.
- Mauss, I. B., Shallcross, A. J., Troy, A. S., John, O. P., Ferrer, E., Wilhelm, F. H., & Gross, J. J. (2011). Don't hide your happiness! Positive emotion dissociation, social connectedness, and psychological functioning. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *100*, 738–748.
- Salovey, P., Mayer, J. D., & Rosenhan, D. L. (1991). Mood and healing: Mood as a motivator of helping and helping as a regulator of mood. In M. S. Clark (Ed.), *Prosocial Behavior*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

August 30, 2013