



THE POWER OF NEGATIVE THINKING

WORRIES AND DOUBTS HAVE THEIR UP-SIDES. THEY COULD EVEN HELP YOU FEEL HAPPIER...

Words: SALLY BROWN

Negative thoughts – worries, doubts and irritations – are like weeds. Despite our best efforts to think positive, look on the bright side, or be grateful for what we have, they still spring up. But what if the reason they are so persistent is that they serve a purpose and are even sometimes useful? According to an increasing number of experts, it's time we stopped demonising negativity. It could help you feel happier.

“Fundamentally, human beings are vulnerable,” says Svend Brinkmann, psychologist and author of *Stand Firm: Resisting the Self-improvement Craze* (Polity). “We are born helpless children, we fall ill, grow old and eventually die. These are the basic realities of life. However, much of Western philosophy has been based on the idea of a strong, autonomous individual, at the expense of our fragility and vulnerability, which have been all but forgotten.”

A flurry of studies over the past decade has shown that cultivating a “count your blessings” approach to life can boost happiness and wellbeing. But negative thinking does serve a purpose, says psychotherapist Rachel Shattock Dawson (therapyonthames.co.uk), and eliminating it is impossible, because our ‘better safe than sorry’ brains have evolved with a natural bias towards spotlighting negative rather than positive events. “Negative thinking is the modern version of a natural instinct that kept our cavemen ancestors safe,” she says.

DO WORRY, BE HAPPY

It may not protect us from predators any more, but feelings of discontent can provide valuable insight into when things need to change. “Focusing on the negative is often the first step in dealing with problems,” says Brinkmann. Sometimes, we need negativity to give us a kick up the backside – people who focused on the negative consequences of not reaching a goal like losing weight or getting fitter were more successful at achieving their goal than those who focussed on how great life would be when they were slim and fit, according to a Canadian study. Psychologist Gabriele Oettingen also found that positive visualisation – imagining in detail that you have achieved your goal – can backfire, as it tricks your mind into believing you’ve already succeeded.

THINK WORST-CASE SCENARIO

Worst-case scenario thinking – also known as defensive pessimism – can act as an antidote to anxiety. “Defensive pessimists expect the worse and spend lots of time and energy mentally rehearsing exactly how things might go wrong,” says psychologist Dr Julie Norem, author of *The Positive Power of Negative Thinking* (Basic Books). “Before a business presentation, say, they worry that PowerPoint might fail, that the microphone will go dead, that – worst of all – they will stare out at the audience and go blank.” But for those who are predisposed to anxiety, expecting the

worst is a win-win – you’re prepared when it happens, so better able to cope, and if it doesn’t, there’s a sense of relief.

Used in the right way, defensive pessimism can even boost contentment, according to the Stoic philosophers of Ancient Rome, who used an exercise called “premeditation of evils” – imagining in detail loved ones dying, or possessions being destroyed – as an antidote to ‘hedonic adaptation’, the human tendency to quickly get used to good things and stop appreciating them. “Thinking about the possibility of losing something you value shifts it from the backdrop of your life to centre-stage, where it can deliver pleasure once more,” says Oliver Burkeman, author of *The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can’t Stand Positive Thinking* (Canongate).

By spending time vividly imagining exactly how wrong things could go, we are more likely to realise that our fears are unfounded. “If you were to lose your job, there would be specific steps you could take to find a new one; if you lost your relationship, you would probably manage to find some happiness in life despite being single,” says Burkeman. “Confronting the worst-case scenario zaps it of much of its anxiety-provoking power.”

GET THE BALANCE RIGHT

One caveat – there is an addictive element to negative thinking, and if it becomes your default mode of thinking, it can generate feelings of hopelessness, and undermine both your mood and motivation. Extreme negativity can also damage relationships, as anyone who has had to work with a chronic moaner will testify.

Negative thinking can also become toxic when we attach a layer of guilt – if you berate yourself for being negative

Harness the power

Use it sparingly: Don’t waste the power of negative thinking on trivia. “If we use defensive pessimism so habitually that we’re rehearsing worst-case scenarios for doing the laundry, we probably need to rethink,” says psychologist Julie Norem.

Avoid rumination: “The strategic value of defensive pessimism comes from using it *before* the situation that make us anxious,” says Norem. “Negative thinking *afterwards* quickly becomes rumination.”

Watch for affect: “There is healthy negative thinking and unhealthy. A sign that your negative thinking it out of balance is when it impacts on your mood, and you find it hard to dispute or disbelieve the thoughts,” says Shattock Dawson.

when you have ‘so much to feel grateful for’ or admonish yourself for ‘being a horrible person’. But as long as your negative thoughts are balanced by positive thoughts – one theory suggests the right balance is 3:1, three positive thoughts to every negative – then we should let them be. Suppressing them will backfire – in one study, people who actively tried to suppress negative thoughts over a four-day period ended up thinking <more> negatively than usual. “Research shows that those who deny their negative feelings are more likely to fall ill and take longer to recover from trauma and bereavement. But when we confront rather than deny our negative feelings, it transforms anxiety into a facilitating rather than debilitating emotion,” says Norem. Accepting negative thinking, and freeing yourself from the tyranny of always ‘thinking positive’ could be the most positive move you make. 📌

SET YOUR FEARS

This “Fear setting” table by bestselling author, entrepreneur and productivity guru Tim Ferriss* can help “put fears under a microscope”, breaking them down into something more manageable. Under ‘Define’, write a numbered list of everything that could possibly go wrong. In the ‘Prevent’ column, write down what you could do to prevent each negative consequence. ‘Repair’ is the place to note how you could solve or cope with the situation if it did happen.

1 Define	2 Prevent	3 Repair
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* Tim Ferriss’s Ted Talk on defining fears rather than goals is on our blog, at thesimplethings.com/blog/negativethinking