to create an environment that is safe, hygienic, and psychologically supportive. Ironically, this trend might be making the lives of our children more difficult rather than less.

5. Asians, by virtue of their unique socialization, have a different relationship with so-called negative emotions than Westerners do. Asians are better able to tolerate unpleasant emotions. Because they do not attempt to avoid or suppress these feelings, they are also more open to positive moods, even if they do not try to artificially savor them for long periods.

CHAPTER 3

What’s So Good About Feeling Bad?

During the first half of a professional basketball game when Pat Riley was coach of the Los Angeles Lakers, the team was completely unfocused. They were watching the cheerleaders, telling each other jokes, and generally ignoring what was happening on the basketball court. The only one who had his head in the game was star player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. At halftime, Riley threw a calculated fit that began with yelling and climaxed with his upending a tray full of paper cups filled with water. The only casualty, Kareem, was soaked. Seeing this, his teammates felt guilty that their bad behavior had led to Kareem’s unfairly suffering from the coach’s anger, so they pulled themselves together and overcame a twenty-point deficit to win the game. It turns out that Riley had always intended for the water to land on Kareem, and his strategy worked.

Does anyone think the team would have played better if Riley had gone into the locker room at halftime intending to create an atmosphere of joy, love, or contentment? Expressing anger—in this instance—was exactly what the problem called for. As we see from the reactions of the
players, negative emotions can be highly motivational. Unless you open yourself to unwelcome negative feelings, you will miss out on important opportunities to wield some of life’s most useful tools. If you fall prey to the temptation to constantly search for something positive to grab on to in hopes of eliminating, hiding, or concealing negative emotions, you will lose in the game of life. You cannot get rid of the negative emotions without unintentionally squelching happiness, meaning, grit, curiosity, maturity, wisdom, and personal growth. Choose to numb the negatives and you numb the positives too. Remember the depressed Americans who didn’t laugh at the comic film?

Why Bad Can Be More Powerful Than Good

Roy Baumeister and his colleagues at Florida State University published an article titled “Bad is stronger than good.” This bold heading suggests that psychologists went out and somehow measured good and evil in the world and found metrics favoring the dark side. Actually, the article is about the way we have a stronger reaction to negative life events than we do to positive ones. To take just one example, in a survey of random American adults more or less like us, having a very pleasant day did not influence the quality of the following day. Having a crappy day, on the other hand, did spill over into how people felt when they woke up (groggy), ate breakfast (oatmeal is prison food), and went to work (tailgating and cutting off cars to shave off two minutes on the highway). This same pattern emerges time and again in psychological research.

- When sex works well in a marriage, it accounts for about 20 percent of the difference in marital satisfaction between spouses.

The Baumeister team has compiled a comprehensive and compelling case that negative events, experiences, relationships, and psychological states take an extra toll on our sensitivities, compared with their positive counterparts. You might wonder at this seemingly pessimistic conclusion, but we remind you that—in the abstract—negativity is our evolutionary birthright. Negative evaluations are essential to survival (that bitter leaf is also poisonous), and nowhere is this more true than in negative emotions. Emotions serve as a tracking system for experience, and provide a quick mental thumbs-up or -down that signals you to approach or avoid any given situation.

It is easy to see that having a brief spat with your spouse might be more memorable than a pleasant good-bye kiss in the morning, but what about unpleasant states such as frustration and disappointment? Are they felt more keenly than their upbeat cousins, enthusiasm and contentment? Try this as an entry point for thinking about negative emotions: take a moment and write down all the words for negative emotions you
can think of, and then do the same for positive emotions. Most likely your first list is longer than the second. This may be because negative words carry more specific meaning than positive ones do (simply contrast love and anger or happy and fear). In another study, researchers interested in how people remember the emotional events of their lives tracked the actual day-to-day moods of adults and then had them recall the frequency and intensity of their emotions throughout the two-week study. As you might imagine, people were more prone to remember the intense events—both positive and negative. Interestingly, they underestimated the frequency of their past positive emotions but had no difficulty accurately recalling their negative events. We also have far more techniques for reducing, terminating, and tolerating negative emotions than we have skills for enhancing positive feelings.

Think back to the last time you had to navigate a customer service situation. Perhaps you were trying to make a doctor’s appointment when few convenient times were available, or you may have been speaking with a credit card rep in an effort to get a onetime waiver on a late payment charge. Maybe you were speaking with an airline representative in hopes of finagling priority seating. Can you remember your approach? Did you adopt a warm tone and play nice? Or did you raise your voice and speak aggressively? You are a nice person, we’re guessing, so you probably chose the kind route. The tough pill for most of us to swallow is that those overbearing screamers often get their way.

Feisty personalities, although unpleasant, can be tremendously effective. The psychological agility we’re advocating here would expand your repertoire to give you access to the tougher, more direct, and sometimes more effective approach. You’re probably avoiding this strategy because you think that being negative is, well, negative. You may think that aggressive, hostile, or downright mean people are generally jerks and that you don’t want to run with that crowd. The good news is that a whole range of negativity—of beneficial negativity, mind you—has nothing to do with being a jerk.

Negative emotions can also help you focus on the situation at hand. When you are about to drill a hole in the wall, chances are that you pay close attention to the measurements involved as well as to the position of your hand. The anxiety associated with the downside risk encourages you to drill in exactly the right spot. (Cutting pieces of birthday cake with a plastic knife is a very different experience, in which a good-enough approach is, in fact, good enough.) Research by Kate Harkness from Queen’s University shows that people prone to depressed moods also tend to notice more details. This is particularly true when it comes to facial expressions. Happy-go-lucky individuals take in the broad strokes—okay, you have a nose and some eyes and it looks like your eyebrows are raised. The less upbeat folks in the Harkness studies, by contrast, were eagle-eyed when it came to facial expression, attuned to the smallest quiver of a lip or the slightest narrowing of the eyes. This is why—and you’ve probably noticed this—when you are in a fight with your romantic partner (a negative event), you read even the tiniest changes in their demeanor, things you’d never notice when you were in a good mood. The point is this: if happy people gloss over the fine print and if that leads to more comfortable interactions, then shouldn’t we all be satisfied with their close-enough approach? Well, no. Would you really prefer a happy, easy-going attorney to a somewhat grumpier one who would be sure to catch every little problem in that new contract? We wouldn’t either.

The culture of air traffic control (ATC) tends to the negative. This is, in part, because ATC is a safety-conscious industry in which the downside risk of mistakes can be high. At the minor end of the spectrum, errors lead to delays and logistical complications; at the other
end, costs can run into tens of millions of dollars and hundreds of people dead. Pushing tin, as ATC work is sometimes irreverently called, requires an eye for detail; those little blips on the radar screen are actually airplanes, each with its own call number, altitude, speed, and flight plan. Negative emotions like anxiety and suspiciousness can act like an attentional funnel that narrows the mind’s eye to important details. There is no room in ATC for good enough. In keeping with what we’ve seen, when all goes right in the control tower, no one notices; people only pay special attention when things go wrong.

Greg Petto, an air traffic controller in Louisville, Kentucky, told us that his tower is responsible for fifty square miles of air traffic between the ground and an altitude of ten thousand feet. This is a high-stress job in which planes that come within three miles of one another are cutting it dangerously close. Petto describes the radar room as a *dojo*, the Japanese word for a martial arts training room. The controllers manage seven hundred flights every day and their busiest time is in the middle of the night, when local Federal Express jets take to the skies in record numbers. We asked him whether knowing that FedEx is transporting packages, and not human cargo, makes ATC seem like less of a high-stakes game at night.

“To be honest,” he replied, “I have to think of all planes as dots on a screen. If I stopped to actually think about the real deal up in the sky, I’d go crazy.” And then he added, “It feels good though, to line up all the planes at just the right distance and at just the right time. It feels really good.” Despite his pride in his work, Petto is the first to admit that there is a little negativity built into the controllers themselves. They can be a bit bratty or competitive when they get wound tight. “We deal with it by poking fun at one another, or by going home and praying, or drinking, depending on your cultural leanings.”

It’s important to linger here for a moment and point out that most people make a huge mistake where negative emotions are concerned. They typically separate the experience of negative feelings from the expression of negative feelings. Most people we chat with are quick to accept that feeling bad is a valid, and even inevitable, psychological experience. On the other hand, expressing frustration, or even too much sadness, is anathema to most folks. It’s as if we expect ourselves to be computers, whose inner processes are largely hidden and divorced from what appears on the screen. This attitude exists in varying degrees across cultures; it’s part of the idea that it’s easier to live in a society where people are smiling than it is to coexist with people who are shouting. It misses the point that emotional expressions exist for a reason. Emotional expressions are an important way in which we communicate with others. A furrowed brow or a frown warns people off when you aren’t in the mood (and sometimes you’re not in the mood). A gasp of fear has a contagious effect such that bystanders also feel a jolt of adrenaline and look around nervously. Expressing feelings, including negative ones, is a big part of the human emotional experience.

If Negative Emotions Are So Helpful, Why Don’t We Like Them More?

Take a moment to consider this: how much would you pay to avoid a repeat of that public speaking performance when the crowd refused to smile or stop fidgeting? Think of a time that you bullied an innocent person because of your insecurities: how much would it be worth to you to avoid replaying that cringeworthy experience? On the flip side,
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how much would you spend to relive the excitement of the first date with your now husband/wife/romantic partner? Think of the best massage in your life: how much would you spend for one just as relaxing, if you could have it right now?

Dr. Hi Po Bobo Lau from the University of Hong Kong and his team posed these very questions in their research. Enter the dreamlike scenario of participants in the study. Think of a specific time in your life when you felt very happy. Now, how much (assign a price tag between $2 and $200) would you be willing to spend to re-create this feeling? Once you come up with an exact dollar amount let’s move on to other positive emotions. A sense of calm? Excitement? Now let’s focus on negative emotions. Think of a specific memory when you felt intense regret. How much would you pay to avoid that feeling again? What about fear? Embarrassment? What we’re asking you to do is put an exact dollar amount on each of these emotions. You might guess by now that avoiding pain was worth more money to participants than buying happiness. But let’s be precise, down to the penny. This is what Dr. Lau’s subjects were willing to pay:

$44.30 for calm tranquility,
$62.80 for excitement,
$79.06 for happiness,
$83.27 to avoid fear,
$92.80 to avoid sadness,
$99.81 to avoid embarrassment, and
$106.26 to avoid regret.

Only one emotion was more valuable than avoiding regret, and that was love. Sure, happiness, excitement, and feeling calm are good, but as social creatures we want someone who will accept, value, and care for our innermost self. Love was worth $113.55. If you, the reader, are not from Hong Kong, you might be skeptical about these dollar figures. So let it be known that when posed the same questions, adults from the United Kingdom had the same shopping experience: while tranquility ($53.47) and excitement ($60.90) were worth purchasing, they were no match for the need to escape embarrassment ($71.83) and regret ($64.40), and nothing was worth more than love ($115.16).

These dollar amounts offer a window into how motivated we human beings are to alter our inner and outer worlds. Of utmost importance is the desire to be accepted. This is a problem because we have zero control over what other people will say and do to us; we only control how we think and act. This lack of control, this feeling of uncertainty, might be the ultimate uncomfortable psychological state. Not far behind are fears of feeling regret and embarrassment. So the three most valuable emotional states center on how we are viewed by other people; unfortunately, concerns about negative emotions often get in the way of winning approval in the immediate moment. But this is only one reason for our hate-hate affair with negative emotions.

We avoid negative emotions not because we’re too dumb to know better, but for four basic—and very intuitive—reasons:

1. They are unpleasant.
2. They represent getting stuck in a rut.
3. They are associated with a loss of personal control.
4. They are perceived (correctly!) as having social costs.

Let’s take a closer look at these four fundamental motives. First, we avoid feeling crappy because feeling crappy feels crappy. That is,
negative emotions are unpleasant. The idea of spending the afternoon experiencing stress or disappointment is about as enticing as spending the day getting a Brazilian wax treatment. People make a mistake not in their desire to avoid the unpleasant but, rather, in underestimating their ability to adequately tolerate the distress of negative emotions. As we saw in the example of the women waiting to learn whether they were pregnant, negative emotions actually feel a little less bad than most of us might anticipate. You have been both angry and fearful and—chances are—you are feeling neither in this particular moment; those feelings passed, and you're none the worse for living through them. You're more capable of handling unpleasant emotions than you give yourself credit for.

Consider the last time you were bored, for instance. Peter Toohey of the University of Calgary argues that boredom is a functional tool; it lets you know when social interactions or routines are leaving you with cravings that you're not satisfying. There may be little you can do about feeling bored when you're listening to a lengthy speech, or sitting in an airplane on a long flight, but often you can extract yourself from boring situations. Boredom is often an important indicator that you are making poor choices, or entering new situations with a limiting attitude (perhaps you're being closed-minded, or overly judgmental). More interesting still, while you likely loathe being bored, you deal with the feeling just fine in every single instance, and it passes before long. When you think about being bored, you naturally focus on how uncomfortable it is; what you gloss over is that you have effectively dealt with boredom hundreds (if not thousands) of times over the course of your life.

A second common reason people steer clear of negative emotions is the belief that these feelings are like quicksand—we can get bogged down in them and see no hope of escape. It is a common notion that depression, for instance, is a difficult state to change, and the more chronic the negative emotion the higher the risk that it might somehow become permanent. So let's take a look at Exhibit A, people who wrestle with depression for years. Here, in fact, some evidence supports the popular belief. Up to 60 percent of adults who have one clinically significant major depressive episode have a second, and those who have two have about a 70 percent chance of having a third, which then rockets to a 90 percent chance of having a fourth. Yes, these statistics are alarming, especially if you forget to do the math. If a hundred people struggle with a bout of depression, then sixty of them go on to a second episode, forty-two suffer a third episode, and thirty-eight have a fourth. For those thirty-eight people, this is a serious problem, no doubt. But a large majority of the people who wrestle with depression will not be confined to an emotional prison from which there is no escape. Most will be freed after a small handful of—admittedly unpleasant—episodes. The same is true of other emotions: while there is a tendency to worry that anger will flip some internal switch turning us into violent thugs, or that panic will imprison us to a life of cowering under tables, you have to look no further than your personal experience to know this isn't true.

A third reason we avoid unpleasant feelings is that we fear that, like a psychological tsunami, they'll crash over us and sweep us away to some random—and perhaps unwanted—destination of thoughts and behavior. That is, people are typically afraid, even if they do not often articulate this concern, that their moods may lead them to lose control and do things they otherwise wouldn't. The most obvious case of this is anger. There is, of course, an element of truth to this, which has led to the justice system's stance that second-degree murder in the heat of the moment is less serious than planned first-degree murder. It's as if the legal community got together and agreed, 'Yes, there is a tendency for
hotheaded people to get a bit out of control.” But how many people do you know who’ve committed murder in the first or the second degree? It’s extremely unusual, which is why it makes the news.

Anger is unlikely to make you a criminal, but it can affect you in surprising ways. Researchers were interested in the term *hotheaded* and wondered whether anger is somehow associated in people’s minds with heat. In one study, they presented some (but not all) participants with words related to anger, such as *scornful*, *hostile*, and *irritated* and told them that these words were part of a memory experiment. They then asked the participants, in a separate task, to guess whether the temperature of thirty unfamiliar cities was, on average, hot or cold. The researchers found that participants who were primed with angry words were far more likely to guess that a place was hot.

The fourth reason we avoid negative emotions is that we fear the social consequences of expressing them. You have an intuitive sense that if you mope around the office, or have unpredictable angry outbursts, people will hide in their cubicles until you walk past. Once again, there’s a grain of truth in this belief, but our fears are much exaggerated. Our negative moods do have power over others. In a classic study, researcher Thomas Joiner examined whether the moods of roommates are contagious. What he found was that if one of the roommates was depressed at the initial assessment, it increased the likelihood that the other would develop depression over the subsequent three weeks. This was true even when Joiner controlled for baseline rates of depression and the presence or absence of negative life events. Not only was depression infectious, but, contrary to recent folklore, the depressed roommate is more likely to affect the other negatively than the happier roommate is to turn the depressed roommate’s mood around. Yet another example of how bad is stronger than good.

Right now you may be surprised by the fact that we, the authors, haven’t gone through the four major reasons people avoid negative emotions and debunked them, one by one. We can’t. All of them have at least some validity. The important question is this: what purpose do negative emotions serve? As it turns out, they’re an important part of our healthy emotional architecture. Although they can be messy, unpleasant, and sometimes problematic, negative emotions are also very useful. Emotions—all emotions—are information. Feeling good and feeling bad let us know about the quality of our progress, our interactions, our environment, and our actions. Simply put, your emotions are like a GPS monitor on the dashboard of your car, giving you metaphorical information about your location, the terrain in front of and behind you, and your rate of progress. People who try desperately to escape, conceal, and avoid negative states, miss out on all this valuable information. To be absolutely clear about this,

- you *want* to feel the prickle of fear in situations where physical harm is possible;
- you *want* to feel the thrust of anger when you need to stick up for your children;
- you *want* to feel frustration when you make inadequate progress in your guitar lessons; and
- you *want* to regret telling your children they aren’t intelligent, attractive, or good people.

In each instance, these emotions signal that something isn’t going right and needs your imminent attention. Immediately trying to tamp down the bad emotion of anger, or any other feeling, does little to shed
light on why the anger has arisen and what course of action it might be pointing to. It’s difficult to emphasize how important this is. The reasons to avoid negative emotions seem legion, you might be thinking, but let me get this straight: there is only one reason they are good? But even if there’s only one, it is a really terrific reason. Just imagine living in a world in which no one really felt disappointment when they failed at a cherished goal. Or in which you could not access fear even in the presence of a fire in the home basement, or a dirty hypodermic needle floating next to you during an ocean swim. Without such so-called negative feelings, we would be living in a world devoid of fully functioning humans.

A Tour of Three Dreaded Emotions

Anger

Matthew Jacobs is a self-employed carpenter in his fifties. He lives in a San Francisco apartment-style co-op. He has a reputation for high-quality workmanship and enjoys playing soccer and reading nonfiction in his downtime. When he was younger, he did a stint as a military police officer during the Vietnam War. He describes his younger self as hotheaded but has long since cooled his jets and aimed to live a trouble-free life.

Late one night in May 2013, a female Vietnamese street vendor in the downtown corridor was handing Jacobs a bowl of pho when a large man approached and began screaming at her. The man—a total stranger—demanded a pen from the woman, and, when she said she didn’t have one, he cursed at her using racial epithets. Also present were two high school girls who fidgeted nervously, obviously afraid of attracting attention to themselves.

As the newcomer’s tirade got more and more heated, Jacobs realized that no one nearby was going to step up and protect either the vendor or the two teenagers. Drawing on one of his personal maxims—always offer two kind interactions before taking a more aggressive tone—he said quietly to the stranger, “Excuse me. Could you please lower your voice?” The man then turned on Jacobs and began berating him too. “I’d appreciate it if you could just move on,” Jacobs calmly offered. “We’re trying to eat in peace here; no one wants any trouble.” In his own mind, Jacobs had just used up his second and final allotment of goodwill. Unfortunately, it didn’t have the soothing effect he’d hoped for. Instead, the raging man stepped closer to Jacobs, screaming obscenities.

Jacobs carefully put down his bowl of noodles and ratcheted up the menace in his voice. “Where I grew up,” he challenged, “this means you’re looking for a fight. Well, here I am. Let’s go!” The angry man stepped back in surprise, muttered a couple of face-saving curses, and walked away. Jacobs allowed himself a few deep breaths to calm down, grateful the confrontation had not come to blows, and that neither of the young people nor the food vendor had been hurt. He glanced at them, half expecting a nod of appreciation or a word of thanks. None came. Instead, he saw that they seemed as afraid of him as they had been of the abusive man.

This is a true story, not a dramatized account in which a brawl breaks out, or in which a damsel in distress rewards her rescuer with her undying affection. It’s an example of negative emotions as they show up in real life. Negative emotions, anger in Jacob’s case, often surface as a
result of external circumstances (as opposed to “coming from nowhere”). They can be tremendously useful, even though costs (like turning off bystanders) might be incurred. As we see here, anger often dramatically alters other people’s behavior, most often causing them to retreat, or compromise quickly. For this very reason, anger—and other negative feelings—are sometimes more appropriate than positivity.

Anger is in itself neither good nor bad; it’s what you do with it that matters. Research suggests that only 10 percent of angry episodes actually lead to some form of violence, which is evidence that anger does not exactly equal aggression. Anger usually arises because we believe we’ve been treated unfairly, or that something is blocking our ability to accomplish meaningful goals. In our data, we coded 3,679 days when people reported feeling angry in everyday life. We discovered that 63.3 percent of these episodes were blamed on other people (as opposed to, let’s say, on a computer keyboard). Anger is typically caused by what other people did, didn’t do, or might possibly do.

The difficulty of navigating a complex, often unpredictable world of social exchanges that might include anger is precisely the reason why adult humans possess such hefty brains (47 times heavier than cat brains, and 19.5 times heavier than beagle brains). We have all been offended or hurt by another person. Despite your kind and compassionate vibe, you too have been nagged, teased, bullied, betrayed, lied to, and treated rudely. Positivity alone is insufficient to the task of helping us navigate social interactions and relationships. Anger is a tool that helps us read and respond to upsetting social situations. As for its benefits, research overwhelmingly indicates that feeling angry increases optimism, creativity, and effective performance, and that expressing anger leads to more successful negotiations and a fast track for mobilizing people into agents of change. Let’s look at each case individually.

First, feeling anger is associated with a more optimistic outlook. In one study, participants were asked to turn over as many of thirty-two cards—each with a specific point value—as they wanted. Embedded within the thirty-two cards, however, were three bankruptcy cards that—if drawn—would cost the participants hundreds of points (far more than the meager number of points gained from other cards). In one condition, participants were allowed to choose how many cards they would risk turning over ahead of time, any number between one and thirty-two. Presumably, nobody would want to turn over all thirty-two because three of those cards would bankrupt them and stop the game. How many did they turn over? It turned out that people who had earlier been induced to feel mildly angry took bigger risks. Anger led them to feel more inclined to explore the boundaries of possibility.

This finding was also supported by a research team interested in how people make risk assessments. In this study, researchers asked participants questions related to—among other things—the perceived risk of getting a divorce, contracting a venereal disease, and an experimental treatment for a serious illness that would save many lives if it worked but would kill even more if it failed. When researchers put some of the participants in an angry mood, the participants were more likely to feel they had control over outcomes, believed a positive outcome was highly probable, and were confident that taking risks would pay off. It may be that anger—a high arousal emotion that prepares us to deal with threats—is helpful in prepping people for action in general. This may be why it is so common to see athletes psyching themselves up by getting mad.
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Second, anger can help spark creativity. This is worth repeating in case it sounds too crazy to believe: yes, anger can help us be creative. In psychology, the study of creativity can be a lot of fun. Take this classic example: how many uses can you think of for a brick? Feel free to take a moment right now and write down as many as you can imagine. Chances are good that the most obvious uses come to mind first. You can easily envision building a wall with a brick. You can then get crafty and think of uses that have to do with the brick’s weight, shape, and durability. Perhaps your list includes using the brick as a doorstop, as a paper weight, a small stepping stool, or a projectile weapon. Pretty good. But what about truly unusual applications for a brick? What about putting a brick in a backpack to get physically fit? What about using it to hold a hot kitchen pot, or wedged into a tire to provide a backup parking brake for a car on a steep hill? You might even use it as a prop for poking fun at first-generation mobile phones by holding it up to your ear and talking into it.

Psychologists adopt the uses-for-a-brick task as one measure of creativity. This task can assess fluency (how many ideas are created?) as well as originality (how many ideas do not commonly show up on other lists?) and flexibility (how many different categories of use can you generate?). In one study, researchers gave people either angry or neutral feedback on a different assignment and then had them complete the uses-for-a-brick task. It turns out that certain people—those with a high need to understand the rules of a situation and prefer a sense of control in a situation—performed better if they received angry feedback. By performed better, we mean that they outperformed a similar group of people who were given neutral feedback. The take-home message here is that in some cases anger led to more creativity. On the other hand, less grounded, rebellious people had their creativity dampened by anger. This is another illustration that context matters when it comes to anger, and that a general prejudice against it is misguided.

Finally, anger is selectively useful as a performance-enhancement tool. No one wants to live under a tyrant, but a little burst of irritation can send people scrambling to work. Parents know this is sometimes an effective strategy with their children, and many bosses know it as well. In a study of construction managers in the United Kingdom, researchers discovered that though some angry outbursts were regrettable and ineffective, others were the perfect prescription. One manager commented:

Not too long ago in a project meeting, I had a rather emotional outbreak with the structural engineer, on the basis that they were trying to turn the tables contractually without any justification, and it had been going on for quite a while. . . . It [the meeting] concluded with an emotional outburst, I’m afraid. Retrospectively, did I regret it? Probably not, actually, because it resolved the matter.

What set regrettable spats apart from those seen as effective was not the amount of anger involved. It was, instead, a matter of context. However, even the managers who sometimes favored an angry word recognized that this was not—and couldn’t be—a perennial approach to interacting with others. One summed it up nicely:

It worked, it had the response I was hoping it would, everybody went out onto site and what hadn’t been addressed was taken care of straightaway, so it all in all worked. I think if that happened often, you know, if you were always swearing at
people, eventually it would reach a point where it wouldn’t have an effect. So if you use it every once in a while, I think it works.

Another context in which anger works well is negotiations. When two or more people are trying to come to a resolution, anger provides some leverage. In one series of studies, participants were given the task of negotiating for the highest price possible for a batch of mobile phones (and their real-world reward was directly tied to their performance). After the seller requested an initial price, the buyer responded with a series of counteroffers. For the purposes of the experiment, some of the participants were paired with an angry buyer, and others with a happy or neutral buyer. It turns out that, in the face of anger, people are far less likely to make strong demands. By the third round of negotiations, the person trying to sell phones to an angry buyer relented, giving a steep 20 percent discount, and by the sixth round, forked over 33 percent of their potential earnings. The researchers suggest that angry people are viewed as powerful and of high status in the moment. Thus, being angry by itself tilts certain kinds of competition in your favor. Happiness simply does not offer the same dividends.

That said, it may not be enough to simply adopt an angry stance in the hope of striking a favorable deal. Some of the same researchers caution—and the science is on their side—against faking anger. In one study, the researchers found that when a trained actor faked surface anger, as opposed to expressing deep anger, the ploy actually backfired. People in negotiations make higher demands of those who display fake anger, in part because they are seen as less trustworthy.

Take the real-world example of Barack Obama. Regardless of your particular political stripes, you have to admit that Obama comes across as mellower than most US presidents. He is a smooth speaker with an even-keeled deep voice. When the BP oil well spilled into the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, President Obama caught flack for his cool response. He later expressed anger on television, but this more emotional response had precisely the opposite of the desired effect: people perceived the president as being disingenuous.

Finally, anger has power in prompting collective action against unfair, inappropriate threats. In one autobiography after another, we found the same story: the initial prompt to fight against injustice was motivated by anger, like the spark that ignites the fuel in an engine. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “The supreme task is to organize and unite people so that their anger becomes a transforming force.” It was anger that transformed W. E. B. Du Bois from a scholar—brilliant but ineffective in a world where exploitation and racism were rampant—into a powerful civil rights activist:

At the very time when my studies were most successful, there cut across this plan which I had as a scientist, a red ray which could not be ignored. I remember when it first, as it were, startled me to my feet. . . . The news met me: Sam Hose had been lynched, and they said that his knuckles were on exhibition at a grocery store. . . . I began to turn aside from my work. . . . One could not be a calm, cool, and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered, and starved.

A bit later in his autobiography, Du Bois describes how anger eventually spurred him to action, and he founded the Niagara Movement, which later developed into the NAACP.

In recalling his activities on behalf of conscientious objectors to World War I, Bertrand Russell explains how he became “filled with
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despairing tenderness toward the young men who were to be slaughtered, and with rage against all the statesmen of Europe." Similarly, Helen Caldicott took her first steps as a peace activist when she “became indignant.” Her indignation inspired a generation of social movements.

When anger arises, we feel called upon to prevent or terminate immediate threats to our welfare, or to the well-being of those we care about. Altruism is often born from anger; when it comes to mobilizing other people and creating support for a cause, no emotion is stronger. It’s a mistake to presume that kindness, compassion, love, and fairness line up on one side of a continuum, and anger, rage, and dislike, on another side. Anger is a powerful element that is maligned by the mistaken notion that a healthy society is an anger-free society.

The deep prejudice against anger is largely unjustified. It is, admittedly, a strong and highly inflammatory emotion. Caution around anger is certainly smart, as is the knowledge that it should not be overused, or used with everyone. Anger is best wielded with an attitude of respect for the perspective of the particular person or persons who violated your well-being. Prepare for the fallout and it becomes easier to tailor the most effective expression of anger. With these caveats, the expression of anger—authentic anger—can be entirely appropriate with certain people in certain situations.

THE RIGHT WAY TO GET ANGRY

When you want to express anger, or any negative emotion, one way to do so is to start with what we call the discomfort caveat. Let other people know explicitly that you are experiencing intense emotions and because of this, it is more difficult than usual for you to communicate clearly. Apologize in advance, not for your emotions or your actions but for the potential lack of clarity in how you convey what you’re about to say. Lead in with a statement such as “I want you to know that I’m feeling uncomfortable right now, which means it’s not the best time for me to be expressing myself. But, under the circumstances, it’s important for me to say...” The aim of the discomfort caveat is to disarm the person, to keep them from becoming defensive. When someone hears that you are uncomfortable and that the conversation is difficult for you, it increases the likelihood that they will approach what you have to say with empathy. After using this opening, you can then delve deeper into what bothers you, what you think and feel in the aftermath of whatever happened (why anger emerged instead of other feelings).

Consider using this discomfort caveat even if you are perfectly comfortable expressing anger or other negative emotions, so long as they’re genuine. Remember, the aim is to trigger a change in what the other person is doing or feeling, to shift the momentum in a given situation so that it is more favorable to your message. Properly controlled, anger offers us a way to be proactive about removing threats and roadblocks. So don’t be afraid to use small physical displays of anger, what we might call micro-aggression, to express the level of emotion you’re experiencing. Push your hands forcefully into a table. Tighten your hands into fists. You get the idea.

If we haven’t convinced you yet of the importance of expressing anger openly when you feel a looming threat needs to be quashed, then consider this. Dr. Ernest Harburg and his research team at the University of Michigan School of Public Health spent several decades tracking the same adults in a longitudinal study of anger. They found that men and women who hid the anger they felt in response to an unjust attack subsequently found themselves more likely to get bronchitis
THE UPSIDE OF YOUR DARK SIDE

and heart attacks, and were more likely to die earlier than peers who let their anger be known when other people were annoying.

The obvious difficulty lies in figuring out how to put angry feelings to work, especially in relationships. First, we want to discourage you from making self-statements that push for trying to control or avoid anger, such as “I need to get rid of my anger,” or “I need to keep this anger to myself,” or “Why can’t I be less angry?” Instead, recognize the difference between events that you can change and those that are beyond your ability to control. If you are on a trip and you lose your winter hat on the first day, there is nothing you can change, so there is no benefit in expressing anger. But if you are haggling with a shopkeeper at a flea market over the price of a hat and you’re angry that you’ve been quoted a higher price than the last customer, you possess some control. Now, in this situation, how do you appropriately communicate annoyance or anger in a way that leads to a healthy outcome? Psychologist and editor of Anger Disorders, Dr. Howard Kasinove mentions that the key is to use “an appropriate tone without demeaning the other person.”

Second, slow the situation down. Our initial tendency is to jump into a situation and act immediately, especially in cases where our blood is boiling. Instead, try thinking of anger as coming in both fast and slow varieties, when you want to scream versus when you want to motivate a person in a calculated way. When you’re angry, give yourself permission to pause for a moment, even if someone is standing there awaiting a response. You can even let them know that you are intentionally slowing the situation down. Choose to make good decisions rather than fast ones. When you’re angry, pauses, deep breaths, and moments of reflection more effectively exercise power and control than rapid-fire responses. If you feel less angry when you slow down, great, but that’s not the goal. This is about giving yourself a wider range of options to choose from in an emotionally charged situation.

Think like a chess player. Before deciding on a course of action, imagine how the other person will counter and how the situation might look two moves from now. If it looks good, continue along your present path. If it looks bad, consider an alternative behavior, imagine how they will counter that, and evaluate this scenario. Keep checking in with yourself by asking, “Is my anger helping or hurting the situation?” When you’re engaged in dialogue with someone else, there is no one-size-fits-all answer to this question because the emotions and actions involved are constantly shifting. At one point I might want to assert my dominance by telling a story, and a few minutes later I might want to increase the feeling of connection by ignoring an incendiary remark.

When we become extremely angry, it seems that if we don’t go into attack mode we’ll suffer serious consequences. Psychologist John Riskind, an expert in helping people with seemingly uncontrollable emotions, has come up with techniques for slowing down the speed of threatening events. Riskind has found that the experience of anger is not as problematic as the belief that the sequence of events triggering that anger is accelerating, that the danger is escalating, and the available window for taking action is quickly disappearing. This sense of impending danger pushes people to do something that might stop the immediate threat but in the longer term will make the situation worse (such as punching the person who cut you off in line at the grocery checkout).

The first step is to check in with yourself frequently to assess whether your anger is increasing, decreasing, or stable in the given situation. For a scrupulous self-examination, use a number and even a
few descriptive words to capture the intensity of your anger, as you’ll see in this speedometer example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speed Limit</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>90 MILES PER HOUR</td>
<td>BOILING, EXPLOSIVE, VIOLENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85 MILES PER HOUR</td>
<td>FUMING, OUTRAGED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80 MILES PER HOUR</td>
<td>INFURIATED, ENRAGED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75 MILES PER HOUR</td>
<td>IRATE, EXASPERATED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 MILES PER HOUR</td>
<td>BITTER, INDIGNANT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 MILES PER HOUR</td>
<td>PISSED OFF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 MILES PER HOUR</td>
<td>MAD, ANGRY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 MILES PER HOUR</td>
<td>AGITATED, PERTURBED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 MILES PER HOUR</td>
<td>ANNOYED, IRRITATED, FRUSTRATED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 MILES PER HOUR</td>
<td>RUFLLED, DISPLEASED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 MILES PER HOUR</td>
<td>CALM AND COOL, PEACEFUL, TRANQUIL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If your anger is well above the speed limit, you’re going to need more time in order to retain maximum flexibility and control in dealing with the person who provoked or upset you. In this case, consider slowing the speedometer. At this high speed, you probably feel a bit out of control. Imagine putting on the brakes so that the way you’re acting and the way others are responding goes from eighty-five miles per hour to sixty-five, and then from sixty-five to fifty-five. Create a visual image of what you would look like and how other people would appear to you. Notice how they no longer seem as physically close to you. Listen carefully to what the other person is saying, and read the underlying message in their body language. Use the lower speed to see whether the person bothering you is open to conversation or closed off, whether they’re really looking to attack or are looking for a way out of this jam.

How does it feel when you imagine things slowing down? As Riskind says about anger, “You might think there are too many things to do and not enough time to do them.” This exercise, focusing on the speed that threats are moving, gives us a little more psychological breathing room. Experiment with this tool. The overall objective here is to learn how to work with your anger.

Guilt and Shame

In contemporary society, people have come to think of guilt much the way they think of being fat—as a dreaded state that is both unhealthy and socially unacceptable. Perhaps this is why weight gain is often associated with guilt. In our culture, to guilt-trip someone is seen as under-handed; therapists offer guilt reduction, self-help gurus encourage people to let themselves off the hook, and life coaches scorn the use of the word should. By contrast, we want to remove the stigma from guilt. We aren’t saying that it’s always good to feel guilty. But at times it certainly conveys benefits, one of which is that when you feel guilty you’re more motivated to improve your behavior than your less-guilt-prone peers.

Doug Hensch, a tad over forty years old, helps organizations develop stronger leaders, but his passion in life is coaching his nine-year-old son’s football team. His favorite coaching experience came when he was dealing with a fast, muscular, athletic player on the team named Zander, who had moved to the United States from Ghana. It was too bad that instead of applying those gifts to the football field, Zander was usually squirting other kids with water bottles or trying to jab a licked finger into someone else’s ear. Fed up, Doug called a team meeting where he could speak to Zander and the rest of the team.

Doug was not looking forward to the conversation, and he didn’t try to hide it when the time came. Beginning with a discomfort caveat (“I’m a parent, I’m your coach, but I also was a kid who played football from the age of nine until I was twenty-one, just like most of you will. So I know team meetings with a frustrated coach are difficult; please
understand that it’s uncomfortable for me, too”). Doug then proceeded to say,

I want you to look at your teammates. I want you to think of all the effort each of your teammates puts in each week, getting hit, getting dirty, getting sweaty, getting out of breath, and sometimes wanting to puke. Now I want you to consider one question: *Is what you’re doing helping or hurting the team?*

After sitting quietly for a full minute, Doug asked each player on the team to give an example from that day’s practice of how they helped the team. Then he asked each player to come up with one example from that season when they had done something to hurt the team, even if it was minor. Everybody on the team had something to say, and after the last kid spoke, Doug said,

When you do something that doesn’t help the team, you are hurting your friends, kids who will protect you, fight for you, and risk getting hurt by someone twice their size on the other side of the ball so you can make the play. From now on I’m going to be asking you this question a lot, and when you see that you’re hurting the team I don’t want you to feel bad; I want you to do something about it. You got it?

When he saw the pack of heads nodding together, he asked them to huddle up, put their hands together, and scream the team name three times.

Zander lost his coveted spot on the starting team. Doug will tell you that the next time Zander started a game and got the ball he ran eighty yards for a touchdown, which led to the team’s first win of the season. And when Zander saw that his teammates respected him more for actions that helped rather than hurt the team (even though some of his antics were really funny), he invested new energy in practice, cheered on his teammates from the sideline, and generally showcased a wholly different attitude. Doug’s task with Zander was to help him transition into a responsible young adult, and by being transparent about his own discomfort and by inducing a bit of guilt, Doug succeeded.

We, the authors, have used this same question in college classrooms (“Is what you are doing helping or hurting the class?”), and while parenting our children (“Is what you are doing helping or hurting this situation?”). As socially awkward psychologists, we ask this question of ourselves when we’re talking to other people (“Is what we are doing helping or hurting the relationship?”). We ask you to consider this question in regard to guilt: is it going to help or hurt you in the quest to become a better, stronger, wiser person?

For another example of how helpful guilt can be, let’s turn to those who have been temporarily banned from society for their wrongdoings: jail inmates. According to the National Recidivism Study of Released Prisoners conducted by the US Bureau of Justice, of the 272,111 inmates released from fifteen states in 1994, 67.5 percent were rearrested for a felony or serious misdemeanor within three years. A new crime after release from jail is the norm, not the exception.

Hearing these statistics, you might believe that inmates are evil people. Or you may believe that most inmates are not much different from the rest of us—they want to find a place where they belong, find some semblance of meaning and purpose in their lives, and hope that their kids have a better life than their parents did. Either way, let’s ask the key question: what prevents a jailed inmate from returning to
illegality or immorality? June Tangney, a distinguished clinical psychologist, has spent nearly a decade asking whether moral emotions such as guilt are the secret sauce for preventing crime. In recent research, Dr. Tangney found that inmates who were prone to feeling guilty about past wrongs suffered more for what they had done, and in turn were motivated to confess, apologize, and fix the problems they caused. After being released from jail, these guilt-prone inmates were less likely to be arrested again for criminal acts. That is, inmates who tend to feel guilty for the harm they caused beat the statistical odds and stay out of trouble.

Guilt adds to our moral fiber, motivating us to be more socially sensitive and caring citizens than we might be otherwise, and these benefits of guilt extend to the noncriminal community. For instance, researchers have found that adults prone to feeling guilty were less likely to drive drunk, steal, use illegal drugs, or assault another person. If character is reflected in what you do when nobody is looking, then this moral emotion called guilt is one of its building blocks. By ignoring the value of guilt, parents and schools face a bigger uphill climb in cultivating good kids who will ensure the future of a healthy society.

The failed public relations campaign for guilt is a direct consequence of confusing guilt with shame. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, guilt is the “remorseful awareness of having done something wrong” and the “self-reproach for supposed inadequacy or wrongdoing.” Shame is a different beast. When we feel ashamed, we don’t just see our behavior as wrong or mistaken, we view ourselves as being fundamentally bad people. With guilt, this awareness of wrongdoing is limited to a specific situation, but shame is experienced as a negative metric of who we are. Guilt is helpful. As for its emotional cousin, shame, not so much. Guilt is local; shame is global.

What’s So Good About Feeling Bad?

There are helpful and unhelpful ways to feel bad for our failures and wrongdoing. To understand how to add helpful negativity to your psychological tool kit, let’s take a look at the differences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT IS SHAME?</th>
<th>WHAT IS GUILT?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus on the entire self</td>
<td>Focus on the victim and the act that harmed them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel bad about who we are</td>
<td>Feel bad about what we did</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask: How could I have done that?</td>
<td>Ask: How could I have done that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel extreme distress and impairment</td>
<td>Feel moderate pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe in no control over adverse outcomes</td>
<td>Believe in personal control over adverse outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to shrink, avoid, escape</td>
<td>Feel tension and remorse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivated to hide or attack (self or others)</td>
<td>Motivated to repair damage, make amends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blame others (find scapegoats)</td>
<td>Take personal responsibility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

People who feel shame suffer. Shamed people dislike themselves and want to change, hide, or get rid of their self. People who feel guilt are invested in learning from their mistakes and motivated to become better. Although they don’t want their transgression on a placard hanging from their neck, guilt-prone people are less concerned about hiding bad deeds. The reason? They’re ready to repair the damage and willing to work so it doesn’t happen again. As for shame, let’s take a look at the dark residue this emotion leaves. Remember that adults are more willing to pay exorbitant amounts of money to avoid reliving regrets. Let’s explore why.

It has been fewer than six months since your last whiskey and one reason for this sobriety has been Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. As a newly sober adult, you are approached by strangers interested in hearing your story. Because it is typical to talk about personal problems at
THE UPSIDE OF YOUR DARK SIDE

AA meetings, you relent and even agree to be videotaped. Among questions about how you started drinking, how this has affected your relationships, and so on, the interviewer asks, “Describe the last time you drank and felt bad about it.” It’s a tough request that brings back painful memories, which you address honestly. You don’t hear back from the interviewer for four months and when you do, they pull out a calendar and ask you to go back through every day since the interview to track how much you’ve been drinking. Because you are told this will be confidential and anonymous, you fill in the calendar.

This is exactly happened in a recent study. The interviewer was either Dr. Jessica Tracy or her graduate student Daniel Randles, at the University of British Columbia, and they did something creative. Dr. Tracy wanted to know whether displays of shame when discussing drinking helped predict which newly sober adults would lose their resolve and resume binge drinking. (If you want to detect shame in somebody’s bodily movements, keep an eye out for slumped shoulders and narrowing in the chest area, as if he or she is curling into a fetal position.)

The results of the study might boggle your mind. Over the course of four months, newly sober adults who showed no shame during that interview had 7.91 drinks. Those who showed the greatest shame in those interviews (the top 10 percent)—get this—on average consumed 117.89 drinks during the same period. Those who had a shameful relationship with their drinking behavior found it much harder to recover from a slip-up.

TURNING HAWKS INTO DOVES

Everyone makes mistakes. At work, you might assume responsibility for ordering flowers for a sick coworker and then forget to send them. At home, you might complain about your neighbor’s lack of attention to their garbage and their garden, only to find out later that they have been bedridden with pneumonia. Feeling guilty, by definition, pushes us away from feeling happy. But although it comes at the expense of our immediate happiness, we’ve seen how guilt can help us in the long term; in addition, guilt benefits other people. As researcher Roy Baumeister puts it, guilt “makes us feel bad, but to avoid those feelings we do things that are better for our relationship partners and fellow group members.” Attuned by guilt to the effect of our actions on someone else, we’re prompted to act in more socially sensitive ways next time.

On the other hand, if you feel shame, expect your problems to escalate, and trying to get somebody else to change their behavior for the better by shaming them is not going to work either. We hope these words will be read by well-meaning parents who punish their child by making him or her walk up and down the block with a sign saying, “I watched pornography on the family computer.” We hope they will be considered by judges who punish DUI offenders by issuing special license plates so that every stranger that passes them knows what they did. We hope this information reaches teachers who place a chart on the wall detailing how many times a six-year-old hit or bit another classmate. These tactics do not lead to improvement; they do not encourage people to become considerate, team players. The research on this is clear: the more shame a person feels, the more anxious, aggressive, and detached they become. Using shame as a form of punishment has the tragic paradoxical effect of increasing the behavior you’re attempting to stamp out.

If you wish to motivate, choose guilt over shame. As Dr. June Tangney says, “We feel guilty because we care—an important message of reassurance for those whom we’ve hurt or offended.” Flawed acts do not provide evidence that you are a flawed person. Take responsibility for your actions, feel the pain of harming other people when it
THE UPSIDE OF YOUR DARK SIDE

happens, and draw your attention to no more and no less than the specific action that led to that harm. Experiment, make mistakes, fail, get upset, and then be more attuned to the welfare of other people in your next round of social interactions.

HOW TO ESCAPE THE SHAME TRAP

Assuming that you are no stranger to compassion, we offer these suggestions for inspiring guilt without shame.

Keep the goal in mind. One common mistake in dealing with a guilty party is jumping straight into a personal attack. It’s easy to quickly and even unconsciously conflate guilt with an absence of values, with stupidity, with greed, or any number of other character flaws. The problem is that nobody wants to be told they are bad. People are more open to being told that they have done something bad. You are more likely to get the point across if you reinforce the person’s strengths and virtues (only if you see them, don’t make them up) but still hold them accountable for their actions.

Start by establishing common ground. If someone did something wrong, show them, where possible, that you share their values and goals. Then point out how their behavior moves them away from those values and how alternative, healthier behaviors are more aligned with who they are. Another place to find common ground, as we discussed earlier, is by sharing your discomfort. These conversations are difficult, and sometimes it feels as if it would be easier to let bad behavior slide. It is typically just as uncomfortable for the person wagging a scolding finger as it is for the person squirming in regret about their misdeeds. If you want the feedback to stick and improve someone’s future behavior, be honest up front about how the conversation makes you uncomfortable.

Instead of trying to control others, offer autonomy. Contrary to popular thought, people don’t mind being told what to do. Consider this: you gladly take out the trash when asked, you turn in reports when deadlines loom, and when family members ask for something at the grocery store, you add it to your list. What people do mind is being told how to do something. No one wants advice on how to correctly replace a garbage bag, how to format a report they have been working on for weeks, or how to compare prices at the local Safeway. Scientists who study human motivation now know that one of our basic needs, right up there with physical survival, is the desire to direct our own life. When confronting a guilty party, do not give instructions about what they should do in the future. Instead, give them autonomy to come up with helpful modifications they can make. The aftermath of wrongdoing leads to the best outcomes when the plan to improve behavior is viewed as a collaborative, creative process between the perpetrator and victim.

Anxiety

Much has been written on the value of anxiety. In brief, too little anxiety suggests a situation that is boring and lacking in stimulation, effectively putting the mind into hibernation mode where attention, motivational priorities, and energy are shifted away from the current activity. As you might suspect, business managers are not excited by this prospect because employees tend to shift toward finding stimulation elsewhere by playing video games or bantering with coworkers. Too much anxiety suggests a situation that can be overwhelming, effectively paralyzing a person. As long as this experience of anxiety is brief, performance will take a dip, but in the end you will be fine. We all know the havoc prolonged periods of intense anxiety wreaks on our physical and mental health. When we experience too much
THE UPSIDE OF YOUR DARK SIDE

anxiety too often, we age prematurely; we can see this at the cellular level when the telomeres that protect the ends of the chromosomes deteriorate. So authors, performance experts, and business leaders aim for people to experience the “just right” amount of anxiety, enough that they get the motivational butterflies without the out-of-control panic attacks and chronic stress. Sounds good and we agree wholeheartedly.

We just wonder why this has been the end of the story. In the early Sahara, our hominid ancestors living in small hunter-gatherer communities survived because of a specific set of anxiety circuits. Designed by natural selection, developed over the course of our evolutionary history, this specialized anxiety program operates largely outside our awareness, underappreciated for the nearly effortless way that it solves problems for us. Like us, you probably have been told that positive emotions expand your thinking and behavior in the moment, whereas anxiety narrows your thinking and behavior, causing you to miss the forest for the trees. To this we say that broader is not better than narrower. What is important is that you take advantage of each of these software packages installed in your brain. What happens when there is the possibility of danger and the anxiety mental program is activated?

Let’s consider three problematic situations that would initiate your anxiety mental program. Somebody is tearing you down in front of a group of people in hopes that they get a boost in social status at the expense of yours. A person you have been romantically involved with is behaving oddly; he or she was late to your dinner date and there are long awkward moments during the evening that haven’t arisen before. You get odd heart palpitations while talking to someone about a financial problem; you’ve never had this feeling before. In these situations, and many others that induce anxious thoughts and feelings, the ancient part of your brain associated with survival is already considering three courses of action: fleeing, fighting, or freezing. This process is taking place without any conscious contribution on your part. In fact, much has been made of the way the process can cause undue stress, given that survival is no longer the daily struggle it was when we shared the planet with saber-toothed tigers.

However, there are still surprising gems in that hardwired anxiety program, strengths that are hidden from us until that moment we feel anxious. In these moments, you get access to heightened perception, including amplified vision, being able to see things at a greater distance; and amplified hearing, being able to tune out random sounds to get greater clarity on the noise being made in a particular direction. You also get a bump in your ability to solve problems. To take an example from evolutionary psychologists John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, “Odd places that you normally would not occupy—a hallway closet, the branches of a tree—suddenly may become salient as instances of the category safe or hiding place.”

Missing from prior discussions of anxiety are the ways it helps drive your success, and that of the family, romantic partnership, and the organization for which you may work. The surprising truth about anxiety is this:

- In some situations, you want to be a highly anxious person.
- You need an anxious person on your team.
- Without anxiety, small problems can easily end up morphing into a disaster.

We’ve discussed the fact that mistakes are a necessary part of becoming creative and innovative. Without mistakes, we don’t learn and
The Upside of Your Dark Side

evolve. But let's not overestimate the value of mistakes; we want to catch them early enough so we can learn the lessons involved without anyone dying in the process. This is where the value of anxiety takes center stage.

When we're anxious, we serve the same function as canaries in a mine shaft; we're sentinels, helping other people by reacting quickly and vocally to early potential signs of danger. This works according to the five s's:

- **Scare.** Anxious people are on high alert for any slight shift in their environment. They are therefore extremely attentive to potential problems that might arise, especially in unfamiliar or ambiguous situations.

- **Startle.** Anxious people react quickly and strongly to the slightest cues that danger may be present (e.g., unusual sounds, disrupted rhythms).

- **Share.** Anxious people are quick to warn others about looming danger. They possess an unusually strong desire to tend and care for other people; this act of "getting out of their own heads" soothes them.

- **Scout.** If others are not immediately supportive, anxious people go into investigative mode and seek more data. They gather information with the intent of being more persuasive to others so that they can build an alliance to fend off impending danger.

- **Squat.** Anxious people suppress other important needs such as eating and sleeping to perseverate on the problem until it is resolved.

What's So Good About Feeling Bad?

Yes, you do not want to be chronically anxious. Yes, you do not want a household or workforce made up only of anxious people. But as you can see, there are huge advantages to having a human alarm system. Non-anxious people often skip ambiguous cues that might suggest danger. Non-anxious people are more likely to ignore overt signs of potential danger because they don't deem the information as pressing as whatever else is on their minds.

In one fascinating research study, group members were led to believe that they had accidentally activated a virus that rapidly infected files on a computer. On their way to tell the person who owned the computer, they faced four obstacles that prevented them from warning others or seeking help. A person in the building asked them to complete a short survey; another person gave them the location of the building manager, but asked them to help with some photocopying as a favor; the building manager's door had a sign asking visitors to wait; and, finally, after being directed to a specific computer technician, they passed a student who "accidentally" dropped a stack of papers on the floor. Four social obstacles designed to trip them up. To get past the obstacles, they needed to be abrupt and assertive, two qualities that are not usually associated with people suffering from anxiety. Yet in the face of danger, the most anxious people slalomed through these detours with laser focus. Requests were refused, kindness was discarded, and they were more effective than their less anxious and happy peers at alerting others about the danger and getting immediate assistance.

Better Than Positivity

The advantages of being anxious are not available to those who typically live in the realm of positive emotions. Researchers found
that being extraverted, sociable, and dominant were unrelated to the single-minded, gritty determination of anxious people. In danger zones, anxiety prevails over positivity. In situations when danger is a possibility but the cues might be obscure, complicated, or uncertain, anxiety prevails over positivity. In such cases, anxious people quickly discover solutions, and when there is a team around them (friends, family, co-workers), they share the problem and the solutions. Groups are more successful when they include a mix of personality types with different strengths—and at least one anxious sentinel.

EFFECTIVELY HARNESING AND USING ANXIETY

1. Create a climate in which the sentinel response of anxious people is viewed as a psychological strength, not a neurosis to be excised. Be explicit in teaching other people about the inherent value of anxiety—a necessary balance within a culture devoted to maximizing pleasure, growth, and the pursuit of dreams and aspirations. The successful group has a mix of people with varying motivations, from pursuing aspirational goals to avoiding danger.

2. Ensure that listening to problems is encouraged regularly. Create information channels and be sure that whoever works at the hub of a group has the right combination of strengths—is responsive, articulate, persuasive, socially connected, and knowledgeable of the different strengths of different people (so they can find the quickest solution).

3. Create an incentive structure in which quieter forms of detecting and defusing problems are rewarded. This means that an antiterrorism task force foiling attempts to bring weapons into an airport is celebrated as much as the agent tackling an assailant inches away from the detonating bomb. The media loves to label individual people as heroes because doing so sets up a simpler, sexier narrative arc. Organizations need to write their own stories, creating opportunities for sentinels to get the spotlight when they deserve it.

4. Instead of viewing threats as either present or absent, remember that the greatest threats often begin with slow, insidious, barely perceptible smoke signals that rapidly escalate. Recognize the beauty of early threat detection. Destigmatize this process and you might find a healthy side effect: people becoming comfortable in talking about friction and discomfort.

THE TAKEAWAYS

1. In not avoiding negative emotions, we gain emotional agility, the ability to use the full palette of emotional experiences.

2. Anger, guilt, anxiety, and other negative emotions are helpful in surprising ways. They give us more courage, regulate our behavior, keep us alert to our surroundings, and recharge our creative energies, among many other benefits.

3. Concrete strategies like slowing the speedometer can be used to transform so-called negative emotions into useful tools.

4. Abandon the notion of labeling emotions as exclusively positive or negative and instead, target what is healthy or unhealthy in a situation.
When you were a child, you probably pretended you possessed some kind of superpower (if you didn’t you missed out). Perhaps you imagined that you could fly, or were phenomenally strong, or were invulnerable. When you think about your emotions in light of the benefits associated with all feelings—positive and negative—you realize that you don’t just have one superpower, you have many. You possess a courage enhancer (anger), an unethical behavior derailer (guilt), and an alert sentinel standing watch over you (anxiety). In the next chapter, we’ll take a look at your underappreciated lie detector (sadness). Because your feelings come and go, you always have a different power to draw from.

In the end, most prejudices against negative emotional experiences arise because people conflate extreme, overwhelming, problematic emotions with their more benign cousins. Guilt is not shame, anger is not rage, and anxiety is not panic. In each case, the former is a beneficial source of emotional information that focuses attention, thinking, and behavior toward a surprising number of effective outcomes.

Chapter 4

How Positive Emotion Can Lead to Your Downfall

If you observe a really happy man, you will find him building a boat, writing a symphony, educating his son, growing double dahlias in his garden, or looking for dinosaur eggs in the Gobi desert. He will not be searching for happiness as if it were a collar button that has rolled under a radiator.

—W. Béran Wolfe

As psychologists who frequently travel for work, how we describe our careers to strangers in the airline seats next to us can determine the tone of the subsequent conversation for hours to come. For instance, the mere mention that we are psychologists prompts some people to open a book, don headphones, or pretend to fall asleep. In other cases, our expertise in mental matters seems to encourage our seatmates to unburden themselves. We can spend hours listening to the details of a failing marriage or a pet theory of motivation. Even pretending to be asleep doesn’t seem to dissuade our seatmates from asking us to interpret their dreams. On the few occasions we actually risk the truth and own up to the fact that we are not just general psychologists but that we actually study happiness for a living,
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we can be guaranteed a near-desperate response: what can I do to be happier? There is a clear and nearly universal assumption that happiness is desirable and, being so metaphorically shiny, we should all be trying to stockpile it. As experts in the field, we know the surprising truth.

Let's pause for a second and explain what we mean by this so-called thing called happiness. When lay people are asked to define happiness, they often conflate potential causes of happiness with happiness itself. They say things like “happiness is family” or “happiness is being grateful.” Although family and gratitude are undoubtedly important, they are fairly poor descriptions of what happiness itself actually is, what it feels like, and how we know we are experiencing it. When pushed for a more exact definition of the psychological experience, scholars, water-cooler philosophers, and book group members agree on some broad commonalities. To begin with, happiness—at some level—has to be a feeling. Whether you call it joy, enthusiasm, or contentment, the basic truth remains: happiness is, at least in part, emotional, and is therefore experienced subjectively by the individual. When we talk about a happy person, we’re describing someone who lives through frequent positive emotions and infrequent negative emotions.

Happiness also reflects a personal judgment about life. In 1965, Dr. Hadley Cantril, a pioneer in happiness studies, asked people to imagine being on a ladder with rungs numbered from zero at the bottom to ten at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you, and the bottom represents the worst. On which rung of the ladder would you say you are standing at this time? On which rung do you think you’ll be standing five years from now? The answer to the first question requires a mental calculation of positive thoughts in the present, and the answer to the second is a gauge of optimism about the future. Both contribute to your sense of happiness.

Happiness is a state of mind and, as such, can be measured, studied, and enhanced. You do this informally every day when you notice something about your spouse and ask, “What’s wrong?” or when you ask your best friend, “How was your trip to Italy?” Scientists take this a step further by having people answer these same kinds of questions using a numbered scale. The astute reader might wonder whether such scales can truly be trusted. Researchers are trained not to rely on these self-reports alone, but also to ask friends and family members to rate target individuals. Occasionally we also use memory measures, reaction-time computer tests, daily diaries, and even biological measures such as brain scans and saliva cortisol samples. Taken together, these methods—even just a few of them—paint a reasonable portrait of a person’s happiness.

The current fever for happiness is spurred on, in part, by a growing body of research suggesting that happiness does not just feel good but actually does good things for you. In a review of 225 academic papers on happiness, for instance, psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky and her colleagues found that feeling upbeat is linked to all sorts of real-life benefits. People who feel frequent positivity

- engage in healthier behaviors such as wearing seat belts,
- make more money,
- have happier marriages,
- receive better customer and supervisor evaluations at work,
- are more generous, and
- end up being promoted more often by bosses.
Then there is the most compelling data of all: happiness is causally related to health, meaning that being happy actually makes you healthier. In one dramatic demonstration of this point, Sheldon Cohen and his colleagues infected willing participants with the rhinovirus (the common cold) after first giving them a cheerfulness questionnaire. Over subsequent days, the research team quarantined the participants in a hotel in order to control their diet and the people with whom they came in contact. During this period, participants had their temperature taken, their blood pressure measured, and were even asked to supply samples of their mucus. In addition, they filled out surveys regarding various symptoms such as headache, stiffness, and aching. What researchers found was that whether you observed the mucus consistency and immunoglobulin levels via biological samples (objective data) or asked participants how they felt (subjective data), happier people were 50 percent less likely to develop a cold than their unhappy counterparts. Thus, while happiness might not cure cancer, it does seem to promote better immune system function.

The research on the overall benefits of happiness is growing steadily. One common theory holds that happiness is humanity’s natural resting state. Happy people are more likely to be social, exploratory, inventive, and healthy. It’s a short logical jump from there to the idea that happiness provides an evolutionary advantage. It’s no wonder that happiness is often touted as a panacea. In fact, happiness seems so valuable that it’s sometimes difficult to imagine that it has any downsides.

One interesting red flag with regard to happiness comes from a recent study of the different ways in which Japanese people and Americans think about happiness. Yukiko Uchida, a researcher at Kyoto University, asked a question that would likely get her kicked out of an American happiness club (yes, there are happiness clubs you can join). She asked people native to both countries to rate happiness on how positive it is and how negative it is, respectively. The Americans awarded happiness a very rosy 5.4 of 7 total possible points. The Japanese participants, on the other hand, gave it a respectable—but significantly lower—score of 5.1. More interesting is that the Japanese people rated happiness a 4.7 of 7 for being negative. The Americans, by contrast, gave it a 4.25 of 7, which, in statistical terms, was significantly lower. You might be scratching your head and wondering how happiness could be negative. Isn’t it a good feeling? The two key negative aspects of happiness that Japanese people are sensitive to, and which Americans have a tendency to overlook, are social disruption (one person’s happiness can interfere with that of another) and avoiding reality (can’t happiness be a bit naïve?).

Perhaps this is merely a cultural quirk, a prejudice of Japanese people, so let’s check their views against empirical research on happiness. We already know that happiness is widely beneficial. But are there downsides as well? One of the earliest published studies to identify a cost of positive emotion was published in 1991 by Ed Diener and his colleagues at the University of Illinois. They were interested in the uniquely American understanding of happiness: that intense jolt of enthusiasm you experience at a sporting event, the powerful rush of pride you feel when watching your child perform onstage, or the euphoria that comes with landing a new job. They wondered if all that cowboyish Yee-Haw might also make people just a bit saddle sore.

These researchers found several ways in which intense positive experiences can be costly. First is a contrast effect in which the experience of emotional highs makes other good events seem to shine less
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brightly. Winning a million dollars in the lottery, for instance, might make a subsequent win of one hundred dollars on an instant scratch ticket seem pretty ho-hum. Second is a carryover effect, in which people who mentally amplify their positive experiences also unwittingly amplify their negative experiences. For example, people who whoop it up in a big way after a win are also vulnerable to a crashing feeling of utter defeat after a loss. This 1991 study was an early and important cautionary note regarding happiness.

Has Happiness Been Taken Too Far?

The tendency is to overlook the fact that happiness itself is sometimes harmful. When most of us hear the phrase “positive emotions,” we think of mental states that feel pleasurable and attract other people. When we hear “negative emotions,” we think of unpleasant, unproductive states that repel other people (after all, who wants to eat lunch with a curmudgeon?). But positive emotions and thoughts are not always useful. Recognizing this happiness trap and taking advantage of it offers a 20 percent extra edge toward success in life. Here are several often-overlooked research results about a happy mindset that sound a warning:

1. Your happiness can interfere with long-term success.
2. The pursuit of happiness sometimes backfires, ending in unhappiness.
3. Sometimes people want to feel bad.
4. Someone else’s happiness can impair your performance.

Let’s take a closer look at these happiness caveats.

How Positive Emotion Can Lead to Your Downfall

Research Finding I: Your Happiness Can Interfere with Your Success

Psychologist Shigehiro Oishi and his international collaborators collected current dictionary definitions of happiness in thirty countries. They found that in twenty-four of those countries, happiness was deemed to be strongly related to fate, fortune, or luck. Notably, the United States ended up being part of the minority, a quirky country where happiness is viewed as a controllable, attainable state of mind. In fact, American collective views on happiness mirror our general attitudes about life: if only we plan well and work hard, we can achieve the health, body, spouse, work, money, and recreation we desire. These views on happiness mirror our general take on life so closely that we often conflate happiness with success. This makes the notion that happiness can interfere with success particularly jarring for Americans, and yet a growing body of research suggests that happiness has some quantifiable drawbacks.

HAPPY PEOPLE ARE LESS PERSUASIVE.

Before we get further into this happiness problem, let’s spend a moment on a basic question. How do you go about persuading someone else to think or act differently? To buy your brand of toothpaste, to start using their seat belt, to vote for your candidate, to recycle? To get what we want from other people, we need to convince them that our ideas have merit and are better than the contrary ideas of the next person. Robert Cialdini’s perennial bestseller Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion distills decades of research into a few principles for marketing ideas to other people. One principle is that people respect authority and are apt to follow the lead of experts. This can be seen in products advertised on television that use medical doctors as
spokespeople. In fact, authority can be so persuasive that the doctor doesn't even need to be a real doctor! In a now-classic cough syrup commercial from the 1980s, a handsome leading man who played a medical doctor on a soap opera donned a lab coat and introduced himself to audiences by saying, "I'm not a doctor, but I play one on TV."

A second principle is to communicate the message in a concrete, detailed way. Interestingly, attention to detail is the type of thinking that characterizes unhappy moods. Happy people, by contrast, are more likely to overlook details in favor of the big picture—what we refer to as a superficial processing style. Extrapolating from this principle, unhappy people—with their tendency to pay more attention to and process concrete situational details—should generate more persuasive messages compared to the superficial, abstract approach of happy folks. Research shows this is exactly the case. When asked to construct persuasive arguments about issues that are germane to everyday life (using tax money to fund parks and playgrounds) and that are of the more philosophical variety (do soul mates exist?), unhappy people created stronger arguments than happy people. In three studies, judges rated the quality of unhappy people's arguments as approximately 25 percent more impressive and 20 percent more concrete than those made by happy folks. These remarkable numbers were based on participant conversations with a friend whom they were trying to persuade. When participants produced arguments to persuade a stranger to change views on a public policy issue, unhappy people were twice as effective.

**HAPPY PEOPLE CAN BE TOO TRUSTING.**

Trust is difficult to establish with new people, given that there is no X-ray or CAT scan to gauge a person's underlying motivations, or to accurately predict how someone will treat you in the future. We must rely instead on our hunches regarding the character and honesty of the people with whom we come in contact. Dr. Joseph Forgas and his fellow Australian researchers wanted to determine how accurate happy people— with their more superficial processing style (paying greater attention to the gist, not the details)—are at detecting deceit, which requires paying close attention to facial expressions, eye movements, and the specific language people use. Researchers asked study participants to enter a room one at a time. Inside they found a movie ticket in an envelope. Once they were alone in a dark room with the envelope, they were given the option to take the movie ticket for themselves or leave the envelope alone: the experimenter emphasized that they—the researchers—would never know the truth. The participants were then instructed to deny taking the ticket if they did in fact take it. What's more, the participants were informed that there would be a reward later if they could convince everyone else in the research group that they had not taken the ticket for themselves.

After this brief opportunity to grab the loot, the participants were interrogated: did you take the movie ticket? Videos captured people denying the act. Unbeknownst to the observers, half of these denials were deceitful and half were honest. Forgas and his colleagues found that when people are happy they are able to detect whether someone is lying only 49 percent of the time, slightly worse than chance. When people were experimentally put into an unhappy, sad mood before watching the videotapes, they ended up being much more successful, accurately detecting liars 62 percent of the time.

Think about this in the real world. Imagine being able to boost your ability to judge the honesty of job applicants by 13 percent. Imagine being able to help resolve conflicts between adversaries, with their competing versions of the truth, by 13 percent. This is what happens when we stop holding rigidly to the idea that positivity must prevail
as often as possible. This is that superpower we talked about in the last chapter, your built-in lie detector courtesy of the emotion called sadness (which, by the way, is not the same thing as depression).

You might be asking, how does this work? Should I be trying to make myself sad before work? We are not suggesting that you meditate on the suffering of victims of natural disasters to make yourself sad. We are suggesting, instead, that you honor the emotions that arise in you naturally at key decision points. When people are unsure whether someone is telling the truth, concerned about somebody’s trustworthiness, or in the midst of evaluating someone, they are rarely in a flat-out happy mood. During these decision points, people often feel somber, even emotionally conflicted until the decision making is over. Just know that this state of mind is perfect for the task. Don’t focus on the short game by trying to boost your mood. Instead, focus on the long game and pay attention to making good decisions instead of just feeling good.

**Happy people are lazy thinkers.**

If happy people rely on cursory, superficial strategies to collect information from the outside world, then they are going to be more prone to using stereotypes and remembering fewer details than their unhappy peers. Researchers found support for both of these assumptions. After being given a list of fifteen words on a similar theme, such as bed, rest, and tired, and asked to remember whether the word sleep had been on the list (it hadn’t), happy people were much more likely to take the bait and incorporate this misleading information into their memory. To get an idea of the extent of these false memories, happy people were 50 percent more likely to recall words they hadn’t seen.

In another experiment, students sitting in a classroom watched a nervous woman walk up to the instructor and physically assault him. The altercation was staged to determine who was more prone to make eyewitness memory errors. When asked about the details of what happened, questions included false details (“Can you remember the young woman playing with her scarf as the instructor gave her something from his wallet?”—the detail in italics being false). Happy people were 25 percent more likely to recall false facts than unhappy people. Happy people, in their contentment, often fail to scan their environment and end up being blind to what’s going on right before their eyes. Maybe there’s a limit to how happy you want your police officer, firefighter, physician, and babysitter to be. If you prefer someone who is willing to pay close attention to details, choose someone who is at least a notch below happy.

The laziness of happy people extends to a reliance on stereotypes in stressful situations. Soon after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, participants played a first-person shooter game in which they were told to kill any screen character carrying a gun. Ramping up the difficulty level, half of the targets wore traditional turbans and the other half didn’t. If happy people are more likely to be driven by stereotypes, then do they end up with an itchier trigger finger against stereotypical Muslims? Compared with unhappy peers, they were three times more likely to shoot at Muslim than non-Muslim targets.

On average, happy people tend to be kind, feel grateful, and put a priority on being a good community citizen. But in aggressive situations, when negative stereotypes are activated, those benefits disappear. Happy people find it harder to escape deeply ingrained biases. Yes, the use of mental shortcuts is a wonderful time- and energy-saving device, but as shown here, in the wrong situations, failure to focus on details in the present moment can be destructive.
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Taken together, these studies provide us with a new perspective on happiness. Although happiness can be beneficial, researchers have started to discover previously ignored drawbacks. When a task requires attention to detail, happy people are at a disadvantage compared with unhappy peers. When you’re happy, the “keep the good times rolling” attitude compromises your ability to detect deception, and you become highly susceptible to judgment errors. By contrast, a slight tilt toward negativity enhances performance in several contexts, such as discerning someone’s trustworthiness (for example, when we choose friends and business partners), when there is a pressing need to pay attention to details in a crisis (think of police officers), and when an effective argument is needed to change someone’s opinion (what authority figures try to do daily). Thanks to scientists challenging the status quo, we have discovered that there are precise situations when deviating from positivity to feel and think negatively unleashes our potential to perform at our best.

Research Finding 2: The Pursuit of Happiness
Often Backfires, Ending in Unhappiness

A great obstacle to happiness is to anticipate too great a happiness.

—Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle

For months, you’ve been awaiting the release of what promises to be a blockbuster cinema event, the latest film in the epic retelling of J. R. R. Tolkien’s fantasy classic The Hobbit. You read the book when you were a teenager and even now you delight in memories of elves and dwarves. In anticipation of the big event, you’ve kept yourself in a media blackout so that you can experience every delight and surprise the film has to offer. You just know that the movie will be an awesome experience. What’s more, you have an equally geeky friend who has promised to see the film with you on opening night. She has been following the production of the movie closely and knows that the director, Peter Jackson, split The Hobbit into three parts, each debuting at the theater one year apart. She also knows that Jackson will be drawing liberally from the book’s arcane appendices to fill out the subplots. Who do you think is going to enjoy the movie more? You or your friend? Do you think your desire to be pleased will lead to more enjoyment, or will her detailed understanding of the many aspects of the film trump that? According to the latest scientific research, your friend is probably going to derive more happiness from the experience, in part because unlike you she is not trying to use the film to produce happiness.

Researchers have found that when you enter into a situation with the goal of becoming happier, you actually make that less likely to occur. To test this, Jonathan Schooler, Dan Ariely, and George Loewenstein randomly gave participants one of four sets of instructions before listening to Stravinsky’s The Rite of Spring:

1. Try to make yourself as happy as possible when listening.
2. Listen as you normally do.
3. As you listen, move a dial to indicate how happy you feel and how your mood changes.
4. Try to make yourself as happy as possible and keep tabs on how your happiness ebbs and flows while listening (a combination of instructions 1 and 3).

Compared with adults using music as a tactic to become happier (instruction 1), adults instructed to just listen (instruction 2) ended up 4.5 times happier with Stravinsky’s pleasant violins, a 450 percent
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better return on their investment. Clearly, the strategy of trying to use music as a means to an end backfired. Even more dramatic, people who tried to use music to become happier while also tracking how well they met their happiness goal felt 7.5 times worse than people just listening to the music. This finding is important because conventional wisdom regarding the pursuit of happiness tells us that people should understand what brings them happiness, create goals that will help with this overarching aim to be happy, and then work toward these goals, tracking the effort put in and progress made. We now have scientific evidence suggesting that this single-minded pursuit of happiness is akin to trying to grab a bar of soap in the bathtub. The more you reach through the water, the more the soap slips away, and the more difficult it is to lay a hand on.

In another example of the paradoxical effect of pursuing happiness, researchers Iris Mauss and Maya Tamir gave adults one of two doctored newspaper articles. One touted the latest science showing how happiness leads to better social relationships, health, and professional success. The other discussed the same benefits but attributed them to “making accurate judgments.” Participants were then shown a comedy film. Mauss and Tamir explain that those people watching the comedy who overvalued happiness felt greater disappointment in how the film made them feel, because they had hoped they were going to end up much happier.

In another study, these same researchers gave adults a questionnaire asking them how much importance they place on attaining happiness and about the amount of stress in their lives. The same paradox emerged. Each day over a two-week period, adults with the greatest desire to be happy felt lonelier, more depressed, and less purposeful, and had fewer positive emotions, lower progesterone levels, and reduced emotional intelligence. This makes sense because that single-minded aim to be happy above all else is a selfish pursuit. It’s about feeling good and having positive thoughts. The notion that other people matter is a secondary concern, which can interfere with the quality of one’s relationships. Think about love in romance, family, and friendships. If only one of you gets an upgrade to that buttery leather seat in first class with treats from the ice-cream sundae cart, you give it up; love is about being willing to sacrifice your happiness to ensure theirs gets a boost. When someone shares a funny story, you often relish the experience because you know that your partner or friend will crack up during the retelling. Love is about adopting another person’s perspective of the world, and when overvaluing your happiness gets in the way, it leads to unfortunate by-products such as loneliness.

The science, however, is clear that overvaluing happiness is only problematic in certain situations. Inaccurate theories about what leads to happiness only ended up being problematic in low-stress, seemingly pleasant situations. Listening to Stravinsky with the intent of being happy and monitoring how much happiness was felt throughout the song led to unhappiness. Makes sense and yet, if you happened to be listening to unpleasant music—such as one of the purported worst collaborations of all time, the Bee Gees with Peter Frampton—it shouldn’t matter a lick whether you’re trying to be happy, because those sounds are painful to all of us. Returning to the studies by Mauss and Tamir, if you recently experienced a flood of stressful events, being invested in trying to be happy did not lead to fewer positive experiences or pleasant feelings. This also makes sense. Our expectations about what will make us happy change when we’re stressed out: now we have
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a ready-made excuse for why we fail to become as happy as we want to be. When life is relatively stress-free and positive, we expect to be really happy after trying hard to do so, and feel disappointed when we don’t. Context matters.

Overvaluing happiness interferes with the extraction of pleasure from seemingly pleasurable events and has additional problems too. The experience of positive emotions perverts our expectations for whatever activity is next on the agenda. You win an award as the top sales performer for the month, and as your plaque is being put up on the wall, colleagues clap warmly and your feelings of joy, pride, and accomplishment surge. Returning to your desk after all the hoopla, going out for a movie with your wife no longer seems as exciting as it did earlier. And an e-mail from an unhappy customer writing in ALL CAPS about the ways in which you failed them seems more annoying than usual. Who is this person to think they can dampen your fantastic mood? Your positivity is now on a fast, systematic decline, and this pisses you off. Scientists have discovered that intense positive emotions feel good but that they change your baseline so that future positive events seem less enticing.

High, off-kilter expectations for happiness compromise the experience of happiness and success another way. Social situations are unpredictable. You could be incredibly polite, an interesting conversationalist, and a good listener, yet the stranger you’ve been chatting with on the subway might get off at his stop without another word. We can control only our side of the conversation, never being sure of how other people will feel, behave, and respond to us. In the business world, the past is a poor predictor of what the marketplace will be in the future, which is why novices can outperform financial experts in picking stocks.

Similarly, happy people over-rely on their positive memories, often making the mistake of thinking that past success was their due (ignoring the role of luck and other people), and that their failures were due to circumstances outside their control, downplaying their role in the problem. While this optimistic bias is a great strategy for happiness and staying motivated, it also leads people to fail to learn from their mistakes and to walk into situations with inflated expectations.

We see this with entrepreneurs who tend to be more enthusiastic, excitable, and overly invested in trying to be happy. With this mindset, entrepreneurs often possess unrealistic positive expectations and fall helplessly in love with

• their ideas (and fail to seek or use feedback),
• their strengths (and fail to attend to weaknesses and the power of situations), and
• their grand vision (and overlook the details that require attention to avoid failure).

This is not unique to entrepreneurs. We see the same problem in happy students, happy romantic couples, happy parents, and happy leaders who get stuck in the past. They expect things to go well because of their bias toward remembering and overvaluing their accomplishments.

Research Finding 3: Sometimes People Want to Feel Bad

Have you ever watched a person at the customer service desk report a missing piece of luggage? Lost luggage, like broken merchandise and ill-fitting clothing, requires us to expend effort—often frustrating
effort—and to advocate for ourselves. Despite the nearly universal feeling of hassle that comes with being separated from your suitcase, many people take the nice-guy approach: they offer the service representative a conspiratorial smile and a wink and say, “Hey, I know you didn’t lose my luggage, you just work here.” We are, after all, civilized. We can keep our cool and avoid hurting anyone’s feelings. As we mentioned in the previous chapter, the people who “own” their feelings of frustration and can effectively communicate their anger about matters like lost luggage are often highly effective advocates. They persevere longer and are more likely to get customer service agents to use their position to override protocols and step up extra efforts to find the missing bags.

This is not hypothetical. One study shows that a little anger is a superior strategy when it comes to effectively returning a purchased item. The reasons for this probably change depending on who is having the conversation and the amount of money and time involved. But you can bet that anger works because the other person feels your discomfort. Your anger gets them to focus in the here and now on what you have to say, and they recognize that a problem will be highly likely and costly (to their job standing and mental health) if they don’t act reasonably with you. By contrast, others who express disappointment but not anger are easier to brush off as insignificant. When emotions can lead to a better outcome, it’s helpful to focus on what you want to accomplish rather than what you feel.

It turns out that people have an intuitive grasp of the function of negative emotions, and sometimes choose these psychological down states over happiness to achieve a goal. Building on the idea that anger promotes successful confrontations—to take a single example—researchers have shown that when given a choice of music to listen to before confronting a perpetrator (e.g., a person who ignored the no smoking sign at the restaurant table next to you), people didn’t want to listen to the calming tones of Kenny Loggins or Frank Sinatra; instead, they showed a 33 percent greater preference for the angry hard-core sounds of Metallica and Rush. That is, people understand that “getting pumped up” emotionally equips them for confrontation in a way that being calm does not. Most important, when people believe that anger is useful in confrontations, then using music to amplify their anger is useful. They end up being more assertive, leading to a better outcome when confronting hostile, aggressive characters.

Certain situations call for feelings and behaviors that deviate from the happiness repertoire. Happiness motivates people to be friendly, to be helpful, and to try to connect with other people. Sounds good, except that other people are not always on our side. When somebody tries to sabotage you at work, you might want to seek help, creating alliances at meetings to ensure that your ideas aren’t prematurely and unfairly shot down. This means convincing other people and figuring out strategies to neutralize adversaries. Expressions of sadness communicate to others that you are in trouble and need help; expressions of happiness signal to others that everything is fine. Thus, if your goal is to gain assistance, this is the wrong time to feel happy, express happiness, and minimize the unpleasantness of sadness.

Researchers have found that people intuitively know that sadness is beneficial when the goal is to persuade somebody to avert loss or failure. In one experiment, Maya Tamir and her colleagues instructed volunteers to collect donations in two scenarios that involved asking someone for help. In both cases, volunteers believed that feeling sad would be more useful in successfully collecting money from donors. To unlock the underappreciated benefits of negative emotions, you need
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to believe that unpleasantness is useful. To be more successful, know the situations when it is ideal to deviate from the experience and expression of happiness. Emerging research clearly establishes that

- anger trumps happiness when trying to confront a wrongdoer,
- anxiety trumps happiness when taking precautions against looming danger, and
- sadness trumps happiness when securing help to handle loss or personal difficulties.

Research Finding 4: Someone Else’s Happiness Can Impair Your Performance Too

Victoria Visser and her colleagues conducted two studies looking at how displaying happiness or unhappiness in a leadership position (think CEOs, physicians, teachers, parents) affects how well the people under their watch perform. Business school students turned on a webcam to listen to the leader assigned to their team (an actor using a rehearsed script). The team leader encouraged everyone to do their best while giving instructions on how to complete two solo tasks: a sudoku puzzle (requiring analytical skills) and a brainstorming task in which they had to generate as many uses as possible for both bricks and pencils (requiring creativity). He gave the same speech to nearly three hundred adults, with one variation. Half the time his facial expressions and vocal inflection reflected a happy mood and half the time he acted sad.

Now, we mentioned earlier that happiness leads to big-picture thinking (think project managers) and unhappiness leads to detail-oriented, analytical thinking (think detectives). Building on this theme, Visser and her colleagues found that with a happy leader, followers performed 200 percent better on the creative task than they did for an unhappy leader, and when the leader displayed signs of sadness, followers performed 400 percent better on the analytical task. These numbers are staggering. The change in performance arose from simply watching the leader. This tells us that leaders can tilt other people’s emotions enough to dramatically improve targeted performance goals if, and only if, they understand when happiness and unhappiness are most advantageous. Leaders who intentionally think about the nature of the task being given to someone and the best emotional state for that task get an extra leadership edge: the final 20 percent.

But this emotional agility goes beyond helping other people be more creative or analytical. Psychologist Seth Kaplan asked a group of people to complete what can only be described as an incredibly boring simulation of what air traffic controllers do every day. Research subjects were asked to sit in a chair and watch a radar screen carefully, and if they saw two planes en route to a collision they were to set off an alarm. What made this job so tiring were the high stakes involved and the tedium: 93 percent of the time the planes never came anywhere near each another. For fifteen minutes, subjects watched circles representing airplanes creep ever so slowly around a screen. While they were doing so, Seth Kaplan had one person serve as leader of the group, staying in the room with the air traffic controllers and adopting one of two management styles. In one group, the leader was a cheerleader, emphasizing how well each person was performing with a litany of appreciative statements (“You got this!”). In the other group, the leader commiserated, acknowledging how boring the task was but also emphasizing that together they would get through this painful ordeal.

In the research setting, staff with commiserating leaders not only performed better but also rated the task as more enjoyable. The
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take-home lesson is simple: do not create a culture based on the assumption that positivity must reign supreme. Instead, create a culture where everyone knows that it’s safe to be real, and that depending on the situation, it’s sometimes better to feel something other than happiness.

If Happiness Is So Great Why Aren’t We Better at It?

If happiness is so beneficial, and if people frequently experience it (they report they do between 60 and 80 percent of the time), then why aren’t we all better at being happy? Why do we move to a bigger house with the huge lawn to play soccer with the kids, and end up feeling less happy because it now requires an extra twenty minutes to visit our closest friends? Why do parents schedule their kids for after-school theater practice and math tutoring, knowing that everyone will feel rushed, bicker, and argue more often? It turns out that we succumb to a variety of common biases that interfere with our ability to effectively choose what will make us happy. Even worse, these biases are often invisible to us.

Virtually all of our poor happiness choices hinge on a single psychological fact: we are typically in a different state when making choices than we are when we experience the result of that choice. Imagine, for instance, that you show up to a fancy restaurant famished. When your server takes your order, she informs you that if you want to order the chocolate soufflé for dessert the order must be put in immediately due to the long baking time required. Your stomach casts its vote and you go ahead with the soufflé. At the end of dinner, however, when it arrives at your table, you’re full and you end up enjoying the rich dessert much less than you anticipated. The reason, of course, is that you did a poor job of predicting your future state, falling prey to what psychologists call projection bias.

A number of other biases lead us to make poor predictions of what will make us happy in the future, and the consequences can be much more dire than a half-eaten soufflé. A common one is known as impact bias. This happens when people overestimate the emotional intensity or duration of an event. For example, you might choose to retire to sunny Hawaii because you found it nearly perfect during a week-long getaway. Although you might not articulate it this way, your choice to retire there is based on the assumption that the weather, the pace of life, and the opportunity to be near the ocean will improve your happiness. A wide range of research on sports victories and losses, political wins, and job success and failure shows that people consistently think that events will be more intensely emotional than they turn out to be, and that the emotional consequences of events will last much longer than they do. Where Hawaii is concerned, you might experience a temporary spike in happiness, but after a short period—perhaps a month—you will have adjusted to your new circumstances and be about as happy there as you were in your pre-retirement location.

A third happiness bias—distinction bias—is beautifully illustrated by researcher Christopher Hsee of the University of Chicago. Hsee points out that your mental state (rather than your emotional state) is often different from one time to another. To illustrate this, let’s take a moment and—borrowing from Hsee’s example—consider the purchase of a new television.

You are in the market for a plasma screen television. You head to the electronics superstore, where you are confronted with
two dozen dream TVs. This one has a larger screen; that one has a better warranty; both of these have bright screens that can easily be seen in a brightly lit room, and that other one has a special antiglare feature. Suddenly, your dream television is not a fantasy but a real-world dilemma and you have to make a choice—one among many—that you believe will yield the greatest amount of pleasure. You settle on a particular model, pay for it, and cart it home. There, in your basement, the TV largely lives up to its promise. You enjoy watching shows, but it isn’t nearly the happiness jackpot you thought it would be.

In the TV example, you are likely the victim of the fact that you are using one set of information to evaluate the television in the store and an entirely different set to take stock of it at home. For example, at the store you were probably engaging in joint-evaluation, in which you appreciated your sixty-inch screen against the context of a neighboring fifty-eight-inch screen. Once you lug the TV home, however, that comparison vanishes and the sixty inches of screen is no bigger or smaller than anything else.

The single most toxic decision-making bias, where happiness is concerned, is the wanting/liking bias. When most people hear about this, they are shocked that they have gone their entire lives without having clearly understood it. This bias is based on the distinction between wanting something and liking something. You might want a pet dog, for instance, far more than you would actually like having a pet dog. Neuroscience research supports this idea that these are two separate psychological processes: wanting, which is an appetite, is associated with one region of the brain, whereas enjoyment, or liking, is associated with another. We won’t bore you with terms like ventral palladium, nucleus accumbens, and mesotelencephalic dopamine systems, but please trust us that expert researchers—Kent Berridge foremost among them—have identified that wanting and liking involve two separate but related systems in the brain.

Craving something, whether it is a new job, a new toy, or a jelly donut, is often psychologically, and sometimes physically, arousing. We tend to want things really badly. Once we get them, however, we stop revving so high, emotionally speaking. We like whatever it is well enough, but not nearly as much as we once wanted it. In fact, the long meetings, tough commute, and nasty office politics at the new job may not be likable at all, despite the intensity of the craving to be offered the job in the first place. In this way, we often function a little bit like drug addicts, making purchases and other life choices based on a strong desire, without the ability or motive to really see the long-term effects.

Where happiness is concerned, the distinction between wanting and liking is of utmost importance because we often assume that these two are the same. If I want something, the intuitive logic goes, then I will like it if I get it. Not true. Trips to Aruba, extramarital affairs, the regional manager position at work, a Rolex watch: we tend to want these things in the short term far more than we will actually like them in the long term. Everyone is prone to conflating these two experiences, and, as a result, we can make some really terrible decisions where happiness is concerned.

Taken together in the real world, these biases lead to billions of dollars annually in misspent money and impulsive decisions, none of which yield the happiness we expect. In psychology, we sometimes talk about an Icarus complex. According to Greek mythology, Icarus and his father, Daedalus, were imprisoned on the island of Crete. Daedalus fashioned two pairs of wings from wax and warned his son that as they
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flew away he should be cautious not to venture too near to the sun. But, once aloft, Icarus was so delighted by the experience of flight that he flew higher and higher until his wings melted, and he plummeted to his death. Not everyone suffers from an Icarus complex, but we are all prone to seeing happiness as unqualifiedly good, and this is an example of its backfiring in a big way.

A Playbook for Mild Unhappiness

Do not be mistaken, we are fully aware of the robust and widely confirmed findings on the benefits of positive emotions, positive thoughts, and happiness. In fact, we’ve contributed to the literature. But what’s largely untapped is the potential we can draw from the fact that under certain predictable circumstances, being mildly unhappy seems to be better than being happy. This includes tasks that require detail-oriented, systematic, or analytical thinking, which counts for much of what we do at home (think of budgeting and designing weekend plans) and work (think of completing administrative paperwork and trying to determine trends and patterns from mounds of information). The key word is mildly, for serious unhappiness in the form of chronic loneliness and emotional disorders impair our ability to function, and in the worst-case scenario leads to thoughts of death and suicidal acts. Here, and throughout the book, we are not talking about emotional problems and disorders as hidden gifts.

The information-processing styles linked to mild unhappiness and happiness are not in competition: one is neither better nor worse than the other; each has its advantages in the right context. We all fall into the trap of using the terms positive emotions and negative emotions.

How Positive Emotion Can Lead to Your Downfall

This language, this labeling, keeps us from being whole and able to function optimally, and fully.

THE TAKEAWAYS

1. When we’re happy, our comfort with the status quo interferes with our ability to carefully attend to detail, and as a result we end up a bit more gullible, a bit less persuasive, and a little further from success.

2. Although happiness is widely beneficial, organizing one’s life around it can lead to a great deal of effort and time being spent unwisely. Trying too hard to be happy interferes with the pleasure, engagement, and meaning we could otherwise find in the world.

3. Happiness agendas backfire. Short-term and long-term goals are connected to each other, and we often need to sacrifice short-term happiness to accomplish meaningful long-term outcomes. People want to feel bad from time to time, especially when these “negative” psychological states are seen as instrumental to achieving a particular goal, such as preparing for a confrontation or persuading another person to alter their opinions.

4. When a task is boring or requires detail-oriented or analytical skills, happy leaders can inadvertently squelch motivation and impair performance. The best leaders tailor their expression of emotions to what their followers are going through and what will inspire the best outcome.

5. If you want to be surrounded by productive, creative, satisfied people, create an environment where diverse feelings and behaviors are honored.
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Peter Drucker once quipped, “Never mind your happiness; do your duty.” Based on the latest science, we offer a similar recommendation that happy thoughts and feelings be viewed as a thermostat, a metric that offers insight into how things are going. When moving the thermostat becomes the objective of life, activities lose their intrinsic appeal and performance is compromised. If you want to be happy, get out of your head and into your life. Trying desperately to seek the positive and avoid the negative is not only a wasteful errand, it will also lead you to fail at what you desire most. The situationally aware person is ready to take advantage of fortuitous opportunities when they arise and prepared to tilt the expression of their thoughts and feelings toward happiness or unhappiness as appropriate. To claim the benefits of unhappy states described in this chapter, you must find, tolerate, and appreciate them. Put simply, you don’t want happy people working as air traffic controllers.

CHAPTER 5

Beyond the Obsession with Mindfulness

The critical difference between the thinking of humans and of lower animals lies not in the existence of consciousness but in the capacity for complex processes outside it.

—Ulric Neisser

HEAD TO A BOOKSTORE and you will find a shelf, if not a whole section, with titles touting the benefits of developing mindfulness. Mindfulness, simply put, is conscious awareness. It’s the ability to observe the world around you without fouling it up with internal dialogue, judgment, or other distraction. It’s the ability to see a dress as red instead of cute, or of experiencing disappointment for what it is, rather than seeing yourself as a failure. Mindfulness is in vogue right now. Phil Jackson, who as a coach won the most NBA championships ever, was famous for advocating mindfulness techniques for his basketball players. Mindfulness meditation and mental focusing are being used in psychotherapy, sports training, and even business. These days, mindfulness is being touted as perhaps the optimal state of human functioning.

Mindfulness enthusiasts aren’t just under the influence of some