



Why are we so grumpy? Find out how we can turn these negative emotions around.

We are surrounded by negativity, whether it is at the office, listening to colleagues complain about their boss, or at night, when we turn on the television and get the news headlines. But does this negativity turn us into negative beings?

Controversial US college basketball coach, now new author, Bobby Knight believes in the power of negative thinking, as laid out in his book, *The Power of Negative Thinking*. He says that we shouldn't be dwelling on the future, rather, we should focus on the here and now. Everything is simply pursuing wishful thinking. He was recently quoted as saying: "I think that we as a people are always prone to think about, well, tomorrow will be a better day. Why will it be a better day?" In an interview with www.npr.org's Scott Simon, he explains that we should rather concentrate on doing well in the present rather than hoping for good things down the road. "Positive results don't happen simply because we believe they're going to happen. Hope may spring eternal, but it's a lot better to work and plan for something than just to hope for it."

He may be on to something, however, as research shows, the negativity can really be contagious – and not in a good way, either. A recent study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* has found that "negative opinions cause the greatest attitude shifts, not only from good to bad, but also bad to worse".

Think about it, how often has something upset you at home, in the traffic, or even at the store – a fight with a family member; someone cuts you off in traffic, or a the lady at the coffee shop is just plain rude – by the time you get into the office, you are a ticking time bomb. An email, telephone call or conversation with a work colleague, which normally you would be able to brush off with a reasonable explanation, now has you seething. And, within a few hours, not only are you grumpy, but everyone around you seems to be

as well. Your bad mood has multiplied and spread its grumpy fingers down the line.

Barbara Khozam, an internationally recognised speaker, trainer, motivational expert and author agrees that negativity is indeed contagious. She has interviewed revered psychologists, teachers, motivators and studies reliable sites on the internet – all on her quest to find out why, and was surprised to discover that many of her trusted sources were completely stumped by the question. She found the most logical explanation in a blog on Psychologytoday.com (<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/201012/why-we-love-bad-news>). The article, she

says, states that the answer may lie in the work of evolutionary psychologists and neuroscientists. "Humans seek out news of dramatic, negative events. These experts say our brains evolved into a hunter-gatherer environment where anything novel or dramatic had to be attended to immediately for survival. So while we no longer defend ourselves against saber-toothed tigers, our brains have not caught up." The article went on to point out that media studies reveal that bad news far outweighs the good, by as much as 17 negative news reports for every one good news story. We also seem to care about the threat of bad outcomes, more than we do about good outcomes, and our negative brain tripwires are more sensitive than our positive triggers. "We are hard-wired to focus on the dramatic and negative, and when we find it, we share it like a contagious wildfire."

MEASURING HAPPINESS

The OECD Better Life Index is used to work out the overall happiness in different countries, by analysing various factors that can impact on a person's life. It takes into account the following:

- Income;
- Housing;
- Jobs;
- Community;
- Education;
- Environment;
- Civic engagement;
- Health;
- Life satisfaction;
- Safety; and
- Work-life balance.

According to the report, Australia is the happiest country in the world!

Unfortunately, many of us don't realise that what we are listening to, watching and the people we choose to spend time with can all have an impact on our attitudes towards life – and our overall happiness.

Happiness is determined not only by what we have or what we do; our attitude can have a direct impact on how we feel about life, how we feel about others and, most importantly, how we feel about ourselves.



“THEY SAY THAT YOU BECOME LIKE THE FIVE PEOPLE YOU SPEND THE MOST TIME WITH, SO IT IS IMPORTANT TO CHOOSE CAREFULLY”

WHY ARE WE SO NEGATIVE?

Michelle Andrews, a Johannesburg clinical psychologist, explains why she believes human beings are so inclined to become negative and despondent.

- **Bad news sells**
Access to local and international news is but a click away, and we are exposed to so much information. Although there is a movement towards reporting on and including “lighter” issues, the dominance of negative news is blindingly evident. Continual exposure to such information promotes negativity, depression and anxiety.
- **Humans possess a negativity bias**
A negativity bias can be defined as the tendency to attend, learn from and use negative information to a greater extent than we would positive information. Research suggests that we are neurologically primed to attend to the negative. Negative stimuli have been found to produce more neural activity than positive stimuli, and these negative stimuli are also perceived more easily and quickly than positive stimuli.
- **Thoughts and beliefs influence our feelings and behaviours**
Even though our thoughts can have an impact on our feelings, our cognitions are subject to distortion. These maladaptive beliefs hinder positive feelings, behaviours and thinking. Some examples of cognitive distortions that may perpetuate negativity are:
The magnification of negatives and minimisation of positives;
 - **Negative prediction:** the belief that an outcome will be negative even though there is little evidence to indicate that this may be so;
 - **All-or-nothing thinking:** the belief that something should be exactly how we want it or expect it to be, or else it is deemed unsatisfactory;
 - **The overgeneralisation** of a negative experience to all similar experiences, thus making them negative too; and
 - **Catastrophising:** taking a situation one is concerned about and exaggerating the negative, to the extent that the situation becomes catastrophic in our minds.

By creating awareness of our thoughts and checking our maladaptive cognitions, we can choose to think, feel and behave in a different manner. How we feel about ourselves may colour our views of others or situations; this occurs through the unconscious use of projection, a defence mechanism. Intolerable thoughts or feelings about oneself are projected from the self to the other. In other words, the negative view or experience of an individual or a situation could be a projection of our negative feelings towards ourselves.

REALISTIC WAYS TO KICK THE NEGATIVITY

Why have we, as a nation, become so negative and pessimistic? Neshika Bell, a happiness in the workplace expert and creator of The Dream Extreme Experience, explains that there are so many reasons why negativity abounds.

“I see it in my work with Dream Liberation; when what we are currently doing is not what we’d love to be doing, negativity ensues – the kind of negativity that starts out as frustration about our circumstances, and inevitably graduates to a state of hopeless dejection,” says Bell. We will then make excuses and question our self-worth in relation to our dreams. Thoughts such as “I don’t have enough time, energy or money to change things”, “I’m not good enough” or “I don’t deserve to have what I want” become our belief system.

The thing about negativity is that it breeds more negativity, adds Bell. In this space, we have no creative power to go after what we want; we simply allow the things we don’t want to come after us and take up residence in our lives.

INVITE OPTIMISM INTO YOUR WORLD:

- Start a “Stop Doing” list. Pinpoint the sources of negativity in your life, whether it be people, objects, actions or relationships, and decide what you need to stop doing in order to create positive shifts and make space for what you’d love to be doing instead.
- Exhale. Negativity is a parasite that we host and allow to leech our positive energy. Just as we flush out harmful toxins from our bodies, we must breathe out negativity from our beings. Consciously breathe in a fiery, energising, positive life force, and release heavy, draining, toxic negativity.
- Go where your passion is. Find what it is you’d love to do and do more of it, and do it more often. When you’re feeding your passion, you’re fuelling your positivity.
- Practice great.full.ness, Bell’s version of gratitude. Shift your focus to the things in your life that make you feel great and full. The conscious expression of your great.full.ness serves up more to be grateful for. And negativity cannot grow in the light of abundance.

STOP PASSING ON THE NEGATIVITY

Shelton Kartun, CEO and founder of the Anger & Stress Management Centre, believes that we are conditioned into being more negatively inclined from childhood, where we are moaned at by parents and teachers, which can result in adults with lower self-esteem who are very defensive and take things personally.

“We read, see and hear negative things daily in the media, and many of our personal experiences are far from ideal, whether at work or in our relationships, or perhaps in our own personal lives where we may have regrets, feel discontented and unfulfilled,” Kartun says.

All of these contribute to a negative mindset, and such a mindset influences perceptions and thoughts to be negative. “Once these are negative, we experience negative emotions and frequently behave negatively in the way we express these emotions, particularly anger and frustration,” Kartun explains. “We become moody and ‘infect’ others with our emotions via our behaviours, attitude and energy, causing them to become angry or stressed.”

HOW CAN WE BE MORE POSITIVE?

- Self-awareness – be aware of your perceptions, thoughts, emotions and how you are behaving, so you can catch the negativity and stop it in its tracks;
- Self-questioning – ask yourself why you are being so negative, so you can address the issue or your needs;
- Reframe – see the same situation in a more positive light, like the old adage: is the glass half empty or half full? Is that person interfering in my life or are they merely trying to be helpful?;
- Manage stress – keep your stress levels down, as high stress can amplify negative emotions;
- Use gratitude – start your day with gratitude and appreciate all the positive things you have in your life;
- Don’t sweat the small stuff – learn to let small things go and don’t be over-defensive;
- Smile or even laugh – this releases serotonin, which makes you feel more positive; and
- Make the choice – just choose to be positive and see how easy it is to become so. ■

“INNER PEACE BEGINS THE MOMENT YOU CHOOSE NOT TO ALLOW ANOTHER PERSON OR AN EVENT TO CONTROL YOUR EMOTIONS”

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