

Decreasing Fear & Increasing Hope

A paper used as the basis for a sermon delivered at the
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The title of this paper could be the theme for President Obama's first hundred days in office. His campaign mantra was *change and hope*. He offered *hope* in contrast to former president George Bush's seven years of *fear* that the terrorists would carry out more attacks like they did on 9/11/01.

However, my use of the title is not referring to the goals and tactics of our political leaders. It is about change within your own mind and your own emotions. It is about your thinking, your feelings, your way of experiencing the moment and facing the future.

A simplified model

Let me start with a simplified model for how we are motivated to do what we do, and how we feel about what is happening with respect to our motivations. In this model, we all have motives, which might be summarized as hopes and fears. We hope certain outcomes will occur. These positive expectations are like mini-goals, in that we want them to happen. As we experience our moment-to-moment consciousness we probably have a continual subconscious evaluation process going on, wherein we anticipate the likelihood that our expectations will be realized. The match between these expectations and predicted outcomes generates either positive or negative feelings. These feelings are manifested as bodily reactions. They might also be called physiological expressions stimulated by current evaluations.

To summarize this part of the model, I am proposing that we have positive feelings when our hoped-for expectations are fulfilled, when we anticipate that what we want will really happen. But, if we anticipate that our hoped-for expectations are not likely to happen, we feel disappointed and frustrated, which are negative or bad feelings.

Now, to make this simplified model more complicated, I want to propose that we also have negative expectations, which might be called *feared possible outcomes*. We worry that these undesirable scenarios might occur. When we anticipate what might happen and see that these bad possible outcomes are likely to occur, we have negative feelings. In many ways, the feared outcomes will have more serious impact on our lives than unfulfilled positive goals. You might actually get sick and die, or be seriously disabled. The feelings generated by our anticipation of feared outcomes are likely to be stronger than those generated by unfulfilled desires for improvements in our daily lives. We may be disappointed that we did not get a raise in our salary, but we are more likely to dread the possibility of getting swine flu.

To further complicate the model, consider the possibility that a mixture of these motivations is occurring at the same time, possibly at different levels of awareness. Also, the feelings that are being generated by these conflicting motivations and predicted outcomes, are likely to be both positive and negative. No wonder we feel a mixture of reactions and considerable confusion at times.

I have made the case that our feelings reflect the degree of match or mismatch between positive or negative expectations and predictions about the likelihood of those outcomes. The degree of fear or hope that we feel makes a big difference in how we prepare for, and how we react to, what might happen next. The fear that we feel might paralyze us, or it might motivate us to action, which might change the outcome that we fear. People who have studied the effects of fear know that fear focuses our attention on threat. If the threat is a serious danger, the fear could save our life. Fear narrows our attention, which can be very useful for addressing threat, but it also blocks our more expansive ways of seeing the future, which might include creative ways of solving problems and coming up with new possibilities that might lead to positive outcomes we had never even considered before.

In contrast, hopeful ways of anticipating the future do enable us to see new ways of doing things. Hopeful people are more open to creative ways of solving problems and making new connections that could lead to possibilities they had never even considered before. Barbara Fredrickson has proposed a broaden-and-build theory that is based on the idea that more positive emotions broadened minds and builds lives¹.

Most people experience a mixture of fear and hope during a typical day. You and I feel negative some of the time, and we feel positive some of the time. We have a broad spectrum of feelings that go from extreme negativity,

which include experiences of trauma, to extreme positivity, which might involve joy and even ecstasy. What makes a big difference in how our lives transpire is the *ratio* of our positive feelings to our negative feelings. It also might make a difference if we become aware of our own ratio and try to change the ratio, so that we increase our focus on thoughts that evoke positive feelings. Some people may be able to change their focus, and some may not. We will explore that topic later in this paper. In the meantime, let's consider some more basic topics, such as: Is bad stronger than good? Has the positive psychology movement increased our focus on positivity? Has cultural evolution resulted in less need to focus on what is bad? Can individuals change their ratio of positivity to negativity? If they can, should they try?

Is bad stronger than good?

So far, I have proposed that you experience a variety of negative and positive feelings during the course of your day. I have suggested that fear is a source of negativity and feeling bad. I have contrasted feeling bad with feeling good, which is associated with being hopeful. I have suggested that there may be advantages and disadvantages to each of these ways of experiencing, although there is little doubt in my mind that I am better off if I feel positive more of the time, rather than feeling negative. (Duh!)

Next we might compare these two major polarities of feeling states. Fortunately, a team of psychology researchers has conducted an exhaustive and comprehensive study comparing *bad* and *good*, as ways of evaluating individuals' experiences. This comprehensive review and analysis was published in 2001 in the *Review of General Psychology*² by a team of researchers headed by Professor Roy Baumeister from Case Western Reserve University. The first half of the abstract for this 54-page review reads as follows:

The greater power of bad events over good ones is found in everyday events, major life events (e.g., trauma), close relationship outcomes, social network patterns, interpersonal interactions, and learning processes. Bad emotions, bad parents, and bad feedback have more impact than good ones, and bad information is processed more thoroughly than good. The self is more motivated to avoid bad self-definitions than to pursue good ones. Bad impressions and bad stereotypes are quicker to form and more resistant to disconfirmation than good ones. (p.2)

It is clear that the authors of this thorough and comprehensive review believe that bad is stronger than good. They go on to conclude that experiencing bad as stronger than good is adaptive to the individual. They suggest that adaptable individuals are better prepared to deal with changes in the environment beyond the individual's abilities to control. However, in their concluding remarks, the authors say:

Although it may seem pessimistic to conclude that bad is stronger than good, we do not think that such pessimism is warranted. As we have suggested, there are several reasons to think that it may be highly adaptive for human beings to respond more strongly to bad than good. In the final analysis, then, the greater power of bad may itself be a good thing. Moreover, good can still triumph in the end by force of numbers. Even though a bad event may have a stronger impact than a comparable good event, many lives can be happy by virtue of having far more good than bad events. (p.41)

Has the positive psychology movement increased our focus on positivity?

The publication of the article, "Bad Is Stronger Than Good," occurred when the positive psychology movement was starting to have a strong impact on the way people in the Western World looked at the pros and cons of positivity and negativity. In 1998, Professor Martin Seligman³ became the President of the American Psychological Association and he used this position to strengthen a growing movement in the field of psychology, a movement that emphasized positivity. Research, and the publication of literature about positive psychology, flourished⁴. In 2009, Professor Barbara Fredrickson⁵, a prodigious researcher and theorist, authored a book titled *Positivity*, whose cover proclaims: "Groundbreaking research reveals how to embrace the hidden strength of positive emotions, overcome negativity, and thrive."

An extensive body of research on positivity has been published since 1998 and this research has documented the benefits of positivity. These benefits include better health, longevity, productivity in schools and the work place, as well in improvement in organizational development and family dynamics. The evidence is quite clear that there are

many benefits to being grateful about the past, optimistic about the future, and satisfied about the present. At the same time, there are also real benefits from recognizing that bad things happen, and that changes need to be made to correct these bad possibilities. Some things you can change, and some things you can't. The serenity prayer offers sound advice in addressing these challenges:

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.

Should we focus on what is bad or what is good?

A powerful case has been made that bad is stronger than good, and that this might have helped our forbearers recognize the need to change. At the same time, research results from the positive psychology movement suggest that positive people are more collaborative, more successful and healthier. There seems to be a real advantage to being optimistic and hopeful about the future. Studies show that people who have positive feelings are more open, creative, productive and collaborative.

There seem to be two discrepant descriptions of the way people function in our current society. They pay more attention to what is feared, or considered bad, but they thrive better when they pay attention to what is hopeful and good. How do we deal with this discrepant information? Can we continue to focus on what is bad, while we try to be hopeful and positive in our basic approach to daily living? Are there good explanations for why we still focus on what is bad, when current societies seem to work better when people are more positive?

Does biological evolution lag behind cultural evolution?

There are various explanations for the discrepancy between our tendencies to focus on what is bad, contrasted with the evidence that we thrive better in today's society by focusing on what is good. One explanation, the one that I like, is that biological evolution lags behind cultural evolution, and that our genes hinder our adaptation to the current demands of our situation.

During earlier times, survival and reproduction were enhanced by being fearful and wary of what might lead to death or denial of reproduction. Biological evolution favored people who were fearful and attentive to what might do them in. However, it is well known that biological evolution moves rather slowly. The human species has been particularly successful in removing many of the environmental conditions that cause people to die early before they can reproduce, which is the primary basis of natural selection. Cultural evolution is a faster process. Humans have been amazingly proficient in creating cultures that enable different conditions for surviving and thriving. Robert Wright⁶, in his 2000 book, *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny*, makes a solid case for the idea that cultural evolution has led to societies where different qualities enable individuals to thrive than was the case in earlier societies. Wright says that current human societies have grown more complex by retaining technologies, political systems, and religious beliefs that foster internal coordination and cooperation. He argues that history naturally weaves people into ever more vast webs of interdependence. The qualities of thinking and feeling that foster more coordination, cooperation and interdependence involve focusing on positivity rather than negativity. People who focus on the positive aspects of life are more enabled for coordination, cooperation and interdependence. People who are fearful and negative hinder collaborative projects that require open communication and positive relationships with a wide variety of people. Different survival skills were needed during the caveman era. There was the constant threat of annihilation during that era, but the need for good communication with a wide variety of people was not great. The reasons for fear and wariness have changed, but the genes that stress fear and wariness have not changed rapidly enough for optimal adaptability in today's complex, interdependent cultures.

It is quite possible that increased likelihood of focusing on positivity will eventually show up in our gene pool, so that more people can build the positive relationships that are needed for optimal functioning in our postmodern societies.

With all this in mind, we can move to the topic of how individuals might increase their positivity.

Can you change your ratio of positivity/negativity?

Since it is generally accepted that you experience both positivity and negativity, it is more useful to look at your ratio of the two, than considering one or the other as separate entities. Barbara Fredrickson covers the idea of ratios and tipping points in her book titled *Positivity*. She reminds her readers that the ratio of positive interactions with negative interactions has been studied for many years. In 1994, John Gottman⁷ published research on his use of a positivity ratio to predict divorce. Gottman recommends that interactions between marriage partners should have a ratio of five positive exchanges to each negative exchange.

Since that time, various aspects of relationships have been studied by using ratios of this type. More recently, Fredrickson has collaborated with Marcial Losada to develop mathematical models using ratios to explain human flourishing in terms of positivity⁸. They recommend ratios of 3 to 1, or greater, for flourishing. Fredrickson even has a *Positivity Self Test* in her 2009 book that can provide a ratio of your positivity to your negativity. She also includes several pages of suggestions as to how you can change your ratio by increasing your positivity and decreasing your negativity.

While Fredrickson thinks that you can change your ratio, there are experts who think individuals have set points of happiness or positivity tendencies that are mostly determined by biological/physiological determinants. Studies of identical twins⁹ who had been separated at birth demonstrated that over half of the variance in happiness measures could be accounted for by genetics. Sonja Lyubomirsky authored a book in 2007 wherein she considers determinants of happiness¹⁰. She agrees that around 50% of the variability in happiness measures can be traced to genetics, but she thinks 40% of it can be determined or influenced by intentional activity. This rather large percentage encourages those practitioners who are trying to increase the ratios of their clients' positivity by various interventions.

How might you change your ratio of positivity/negativity?

Fredrickson and others tell us that individuals can change their ratios if they want to. You might ask yourself if you want to change your ratio. If you do, and if you want some guidance in doing so, there are a number of books, articles, and websites that can help you increase your level of happiness, or your ratio of positivity. Fredrickson's 2009 book and Lyubomirsky's 2007 book are two of the best for offering a variety of approaches. A link¹¹ to an online electronic host authored by Deborah Kotz can be found in the notes/references listed in this paper. Her April 22, 2009 posting is titled: 10 Secrets to Finding Happiness During the Recession.

My own approach to changing the ratios of positivity/negativity

My career as a counselor educator has been focused on processes of facilitating the personal development of others. My primary approach to facilitating the development of another person has emphasized the articulation of self-identity. I developed processes whereby individuals articulated their personalized attributes for their ideal jobs. Later I developed processes whereby participants articulated personal goals. In 1987, I collaborated with Bernard Haldane¹² to study and improve his methods of helping others articulate their Dependable Strengths®. Ten years later, I witnessed the development of the positive psychology movement and worked to connect our practices of articulating Dependable Strengths¹³ to other efforts focusing on strengths. I have tried to develop improved approaches to articulating strengths by encouraging strengths-focused relationships and strengths-focused communities.

Based on the experiences described above, along with a passion to facilitate higher ratios of positivity/negativity, I propose the following activities for increasing your ratio:

- (1) Resolve to become more aware of your current, momentary feelings. Your feelings have positive or negative valences. You can become more aware of your feelings by recognizing changes in different parts of your body during times when you are feeling more emotional than usual. There will be different feelings when you are feeling positive than when you are feeling negative. Increase your awareness of positive feelings by noting how your body feels during especially joyful experiences. Similarly, pay special attention to your physiological reactions when you are angry or frustrated. Try to develop a repertory of signals or signs that you are feeling positive or negative.

- (2) Establish a vocabulary for naming the intensity of different feelings, as well as the way different parts of your body feels when you are experiencing different levels of positive or negative feelings.
- (3) Keep a journal about your feelings. In that journal, describe different incidents or events when you felt clearly positive or clearly negative. Teach yourself to be more aware of when you are feeling positive, and when you are feeling negative.
- (4) Experiment with episodes when you consciously try to pay attention to positive aspects of what you are attending to at a particular moment. If you have just been involved in an event that made you upset or irritated, try to identify positive things that were happening at the same time. Play around with the idea that there are positive ways of characterizing events that left you with negative feelings. Try to recognize that you can choose to focus on different aspects of a given situation. You do have some control over the way you experience an event in your life.
- (5) Experiment in reframing particular events in your life, looking for negative aspects of experiences that were mostly positive, and vice versa.
- (6) Try to revisit some of your past experiences and look for reasons why you are grateful for those past experiences. Did you learn something? Did someone show some kindness to you or someone else during the event?
- (7) Think about those possible events where you might experience special feelings of interest, competence, or contribution. Think about more activities you might try where you use the strengths that you know you have.
- (8) Try to have special times when you meet with one, two or three chosen companions, wherein you tell each other about some of your most fulfilling past experiences. Ask the others if they would help you identify special strengths that you demonstrated during the fulfilling experiences you shared with them. Then encourage the others with whom you are sharing experiences, to share their experiences and then suggest strengths that you thought they were demonstrating during their fulfilling experiences.
(I have written an intentional plan for this process, and I would be happy to share it with you in the future.)

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