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Praise Is Fleeting, but Brickbats We Recall

By ALINA TUGEND

MY sisters and I have often marveled that the stories we tell over and over about our childhood tend to focus on what went wrong. We talk about the time my older sister got her finger crushed by a train door on a trip in Scandinavia. We recount the time we almost missed the plane to Israel because my younger sister lost her stuffed animal in the airport terminal.

Since, fortunately, we've had many more pleasant experiences than unhappy ones, I assumed that we were unusual in zeroing in on our negative experiences. But it turns out we're typical.

"This is a general tendency for everyone," said Clifford Nass, a professor of communication at Stanford University. "Some people do have a more positive outlook, but almost everyone remembers negative things more strongly and in more detail."

There are physiological as well as psychological reasons for this.

"The brain handles positive and negative information in different hemispheres," said Professor Nass, who co-authored "The Man Who Lied to His Laptop: What Machines Teach Us About Human Relationships" (Penguin 2010). Negative emotions generally involve more thinking, and the information is processed more thoroughly than positive ones, he said. Thus, we tend to ruminate more about unpleasant events — and use stronger words to describe them — than happy ones.

Roy F. Baumeister, a professor of social psychology at Florida State University, captured the idea in the title of a journal article he co-authored in 2001, "[Bad Is Stronger Than Good](#)," which appeared in *The Review of General Psychology*. "Research over and over again shows this is a basic and wide-ranging principle of psychology," he said. "It's in human nature, and there are even signs of it in animals," in experiments with rats.

As the article, which is a summary of much of the research on the subject, succinctly puts it: "Bad emotions, bad parents and bad feedback have more impact than good ones. Bad impressions and bad stereotypes are quicker to form and more resistant to disconfirmation than good ones."

So Professor Baumeister and his colleagues note, losing money, being abandoned by friends and receiving criticism will have a greater impact than winning money, making friends or receiving praise.

In an experiment in which participants gained or lost the same amount of money, for instance, the distress participants expressed over losing the money was greater than the joy that accompanied the gain.

“Put another way, you are more upset about losing \$50 than you are happy about gaining \$50,” the paper states.

In addition, bad events wear off more slowly than good ones.

And just to show that my family’s tendency to focus on the negative is not unusual, interviews with children and adults up to 50 years old about childhood memories “found a preponderance of unpleasant memories, even among people who rated their childhoods as having been relatively pleasant and happy,” Professor Baumeister wrote.

As with many other quirks of the human psyche, there may be an evolutionary basis for this. Those who are “more attuned to bad things would have been more likely to survive threats and, consequently, would have increased the probability of passing along their genes,” the article states. “Survival requires urgent attention to possible bad outcomes but less urgent with regard to good ones.”

And Professor Nass offered another interesting point: we tend to see people who say negative things as smarter than those who are positive. Thus, we are more likely to give greater weight to critical reviews.

“If I tell you that you are going to give a lecture before smarter people, you will say more negative things,” he said.

So this is all rather depressing. There is an upside, however. Just knowing this may help us better deal with the bad stuff that will inevitably happen.

Take the work of Teresa M. Amabile, a professor of business administration and director of research at the Harvard Business School. She asked 238 professionals working on 26 different creative projects from different companies and industries to fill out confidential daily diaries over a number of months. The participants were asked to answer questions based on a numeric scale and briefly describe one thing that stood out that day.

“We found that of all the events that could make for a great day at work, the most important was making progress on meaningful work — even a small step forward,” said Professor Amabile, a co-author of “The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement and Creativity at Work” (Harvard Business Review Press, 2011). “A setback, on the other hand, meant the employee felt blocked in some way from making such progress. Setbacks stood out on the worst days at work.”

After analyzing some 12,000 diary entries, Professor Amabile said she found that the negative effect of a setback at work on happiness was more than twice as strong as the positive effect of an event that signaled progress. And the power of a setback to increase frustration is over three times as strong as the power of progress to decrease frustration.

“This applies even to small events,” she said.

If managers or bosses know this, then they should be acutely aware of the impact they have when they fail

to recognize the importance to workers of making progress on meaningful work, criticize, take credit for their employees' work, pass on negative information from on top without filtering and don't listen when employees try to express grievances.

The answer, then, is not to heap meaningless praise on our employees or, for that matter, our children or friends, but to criticize constructively — and sparingly.

Professor Nass said that most people can take in only one critical comment at a time.

“I have stopped people and told them, ‘Let me think about this.’ I'm willing to hear more criticism but not all at one time.”

He also said research had shown that how the brain processed criticism — that we remembered much more after we heard disapproving remarks than before — belied the effectiveness of a well-worn management tool, known as the criticism sandwich. That is offering someone a few words of praise, then getting to the meat of the problem, and finally adding a few more words of praise.

Rather, Professor Nass suggested, it's better to offer the criticism right off the bat, then follow with a list of positive attributes.

Also, perhaps the very fact that we tend to praise our children when they're young — too much and for too many meaningless things, I would argue — means they don't get the opportunity to build up a resilience when they do receive negative feedback.

Professor Baumeister said: “If criticism was more common, we might be more accepting of it.”

Oddly, I find this research, in some ways, reassuring. It's not just me. I don't need to beat myself up because I seem to fret excessively when things go wrong.

It turns out that a strategy I started years ago apparently can be effective. I have a “kudos” file in which I put all the praise I've received, along with e-mails from friends or family that make me feel particularly good.

As Professor Baumeister noted in his study, “Many good events can overcome the psychological effects of a bad one.” In fact, the authors quote a ratio of five goods for every one bad.

That's a good reminder that we all need to engage in more acts of kindness — toward others and ourselves — to balance out the world.

Excuse me now. I'm off to read my kudos file. And if you would like to add to it, feel free.

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