

## The Power of Negativity; Methods for Coping

by Bridgett Sullivan, LPCC

Did you know that our brains prefer pessimism and criticism? Negativity holds the same value to our brains as sugar does to our taste buds.

John Cacioppo (University of Chicago) found that, as humans, we are hard-wired to give more weight to negative information and experiences than to positive information and experiences. Cacioppo believes this pattern traces back to earlier times when, in order to survive, we had to know as much as possible about the negatives around us. He found that levels of compassion, respect and empathy between couples are impacted by the number of negative, pessimistic and critical interactions as compared to those that are positive, hopeful and complimentary. He found that the longevity of these relationships had to do with the following ratio: five to one. Every five negative interactions needed to be followed by at least one positive interaction.

### Negativity impacts how we see people.

Robb Willer (Stanford University) and Matt Feinberg (University of Toronto) formed pairs of people based on random differences of opinion. Results showed that people who differ in opinion tended to see those with whom they differ as being less attractive and less intelligent than themselves.

### Negativity impacts how we perceive things.

Jay Narayanan (National University of Singapore) showed two different groups of people (self-identified as tending towards grudge-holding or being quick to forgive) pictures of hills. Those who identified as grudge-holding tended to see the hills as steeper than those who identified as being quick to forgive.

Negativity impacts how we see feel about our colleagues. Kim Cameron (Ross School of Business-University of Michigan) studied the impact of supervisors complimenting and correcting supervisees. When supervisors used a compliment to correction ratio of 3 to 1; those they supervise had higher levels of compassion and acceptance towards these supervisors as well as towards their colleagues. Supervisees who received compliments and corrections from supervisors using a 50-50 ratio showed little to no change in levels of compassion and acceptance. Kristin Neff (University of Texas at Austin) studied compassion in corporate leadership. She found that organizations where corporate leaders showed high levels of compassion also showed high levels of employee productivity, and low levels of dissatisfaction and job turnover.

### Negativity changes how we see others.

One study looked at how we see others we have negative feelings toward, specifically those with whom we disagree. The study divided participants into two groups. In one group, participants were expected to debate with the goal of trying to change the opponent's values and beliefs. In another group, before debating, participants created a group list of commonly held values and beliefs, and then debated in the same way. At the end, all participants were individually interviewed and questioned about their feelings of compassion toward those with whom they disagreed. The second group, the one that made the group list first, showed higher levels of compassion toward those with whom they disagreed than the first group.

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## Negativity changes how we see the world in which we live.

A recent study from the *Journal of Consumer Research* shows that negativity changes how we see the world. When we view things as more negative than positive, our perception about ourselves, others, and the world doesn't just go from good to bad; they go from bad to worse. Negativity is contagious. Researchers from Indiana University found that when consumers were asked to individually evaluate products, the evaluations ranged from positive to negative. Researchers shared with these consumers the evaluations given by others. Those evaluations that were negative had a higher likelihood of swaying consumer's opinions than those that were positive.



## Negativity affects our happiness.

Humans are social creatures; we care about what others think. Our desire to be social is greatly impacted by negativity. Raj Raghunathan, author of *If You Are So Smart, Why Aren't You Happy?* found that people would rather spend the evening recalling a negative experience with people who have the same opinions they do than spend an evening having a positive experience with people whose opinions differ from their own. Negativity impacts our overall health, our moods, and increases our level of distrust. Negativity saps our compassion and desire to help each other. Raghunathan writes that negativity has its roots in three basic fears: fear of disrespect, fear of not being loved, and fear that bad things are going to happen.

## What can we do about the impact of negativity?

Raghunathan suggests that we combat negativity on a conscious level. He suggests the following three approaches. The first is for us to have compassion for who and what we experience as negative. The second is to take responsibility for how much we allow negativity to influence our lives. He suggests daily practices such as focusing on gratitude, practicing mindfulness, exercise, making sure you get enough sleep, and random acts of service and kindness. Try using those positive to negative ratios I mentioned earlier (for every five exposures to negativity have at least one exposure to positivity). Limit your exposure to negativity on television and radio. Make a conscious effort to have a positive outlook. Seek out positive people and positive interactions. Work toward finding a common ground when you are at odds with others. And when you have to, fake it until you make it.

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