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The Opinion Pages

# The Power of Feeling Bad

By Anna North

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Today in reasons fearing the worst might be good for you: It could make you better at your job.

In an excerpt from their book “The Upside of Your Dark Side” at Science of Us, Todd Kashdan and Robert Biswas-Diener write that negative feelings “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.”

And this kind of anxiety can be useful in certain jobs. Dr. Kashdan and Dr. Biswas-Diener cite air-traffic control (ATC) as one profession in which worry can be especially helpful:

“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.”

It’s not only super-high-stakes careers that might benefit from some ill-feeling. Earlier this year, the management professor Dirk Lindebaum and the organizational behavior professor Peter J. Jordan put together a special issue of the journal Human Relations focusing on when it can be a good idea to feel bad at work, and vice versa. In their introduction to the issue, they note that much research focuses on the downsides of feeling bad at work, like depression or “a lack of control in maintaining a professional demeanor.” But the research in the issue also points to some upsides.

One study finds that sharing bad feelings with co-workers actually turned out well for people about 70 percent of the time. Another, led by Rebecca Mitchell, suggests that when people of different specialties work together in teams, a negative mood can sometimes lead to better work. Bad feelings (her team looked specifically at “distress, irritation, boredom, tension, upset and hostility”) can make you “think there’s something wrong,” Dr. Mitchell told Op-Talk, “and so you tend to look for external information to support your argument, to be much more rigorous about questioning your own presumptions and other people’s perspectives, much more reliant on objective data.” All of these tendencies can be especially helpful in a work environment “where everybody’s agreeing, and everybody’s being super-cooperative, and everybody’s trying really hard not to rock the boat” — where people “don’t want to engage in any sort of conflict or challenge.”

Teams that bring together people with different backgrounds can often have a fair amount of conflict anyway, she added, and leaders will often try to calm or defuse it. Dr. Mitchell’s research, she said, raises the question “Are you sure you want to always do that? Because sometimes it might be useful to let this happen.”

Some of her other work, she added, has even found that feeling threatened can be a good thing. Specifically, facing questions about what someone of your professional background could add to the discussion at hand can motivate you to show how much you can contribute. “If you have this dynamic where people feel a little bit threatened in terms of their expertise or specialization,” she said, “they’ll pick up the pieces of their knowledge, the skills that they have that nobody else has, and say, ‘you don’t have this and you haven’t experienced this.’”

“If you get that unique, novel information coming out and being discussed,” she explained, “you get such an increase in innovation.”

Bad feelings aren’t helpful in every situation, she noted: “It’s not useful to bring negative affect and hostility into a situation where people are already arguing.”

But her research does suggest that a little bit of negativity at work can keep people from agreeing too quickly and instead encourage them to focus on getting it right — the workplace equivalent, perhaps, of making really sure you drill in the right spot.

Dr. Kashdan and Dr. Biswas-Diener write that not every situation calls for the intense focus negativity can provide — cutting slices of birthday cake, for example, is a scenario “in which a good-enough approach is, in fact, good enough.” They also note that feeling bad can make us more attuned to other people’s facial expressions, which they say is why “when you are in a fight with your romantic partner, you read even the tiniest changes in their demeanor, things you’d never notice when you were in a good mood.” Noticing our partners’ smallest tics might make us more sensitive

to their emotions, but it also might make us even *more* anxious than we already were, and drag the fight out even longer.

Many of us can probably think of a scenario when negativity made everything worse, when fear or sadness made us fixate on small problems and magnify them. But, Drs. Kashdan and Biswas-Diener suggest, there are times when seeing the small problems is exactly what we need. The trick may be figuring out when it's one of those times, and when it's time to accept what's good enough.

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